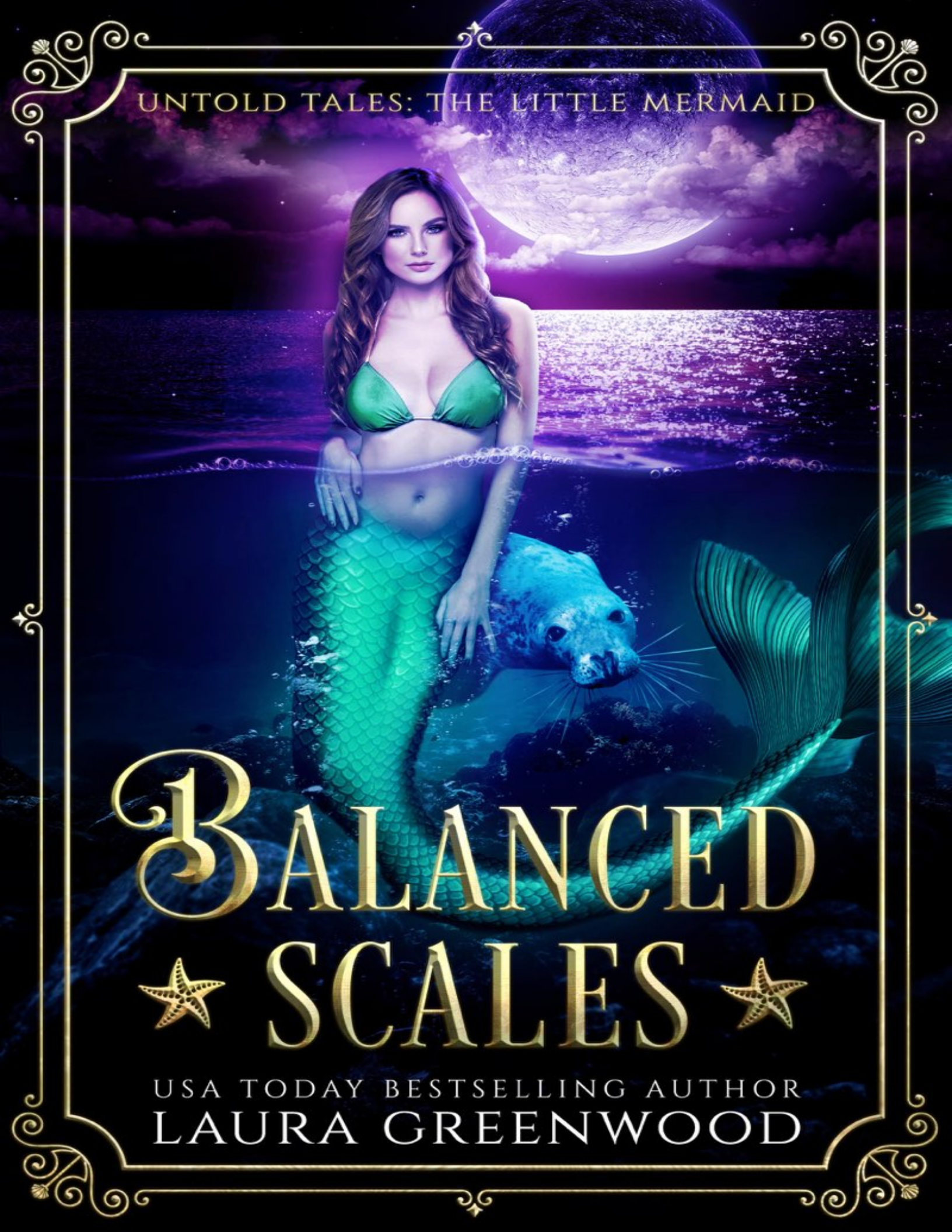
UNTOLD TALES: THE LITTLE MERMAID
BALANCED SCALES
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAURA GREENWOOD

BALANCED SCALES

UNTOLD TALES: THE LITTLE MERMAID

LAURA GREENWOOD

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Also by Laura Greenwood

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lauragreenwood@authorlauragreenwood.co.uk.

Visit Laura Greenwood's website at:

www.authorlauragreenwood.co.uk

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BLURB

A shipwreck leads to the thing mermaids most fear…

Mari has joined the ranks of the soulless mer, cursed to disappear when they die and not live on in the spirit world. There's only one way to stop it but that involves something no one has ever managed before. With the aid of her shape-shifting pet seal, a rescued sailor, and the spirit of a man she can't even see, Mari ventures onto land for the first time in her life, determined to save the souls of her people.

But the land of men comes with many dangers, and not all her allies can be trusted. Can she restore what's been stolen and right the balance between land and sea once more? Or will she doom herself for eternity…

-

A standalone story inspired by the Little Mermaid. An Untold Tales Fairy Tale Retelling.

1

A CREAKING SOUND took over the sea and I looked around frantically, trying to find the source. I needed to get further below the surface. I'd only just turned eighteen today and it was too soon for me to be this near the surface. No mermaid came this close until the day after their birthday. Not that I had any idea why. I just didn't want to make my Dad angry by staying here for too long.

I turned to start swimming back home and deep enough that it could be called safety.

Something fell past me and I flicked my tail, sending myself back through the water and away from the perceived danger.

A moment later, things came into focus. A large piece of wood falling past me. I glanced back at the surface but wasn't able to make out what was going on through the bubbles churning through the waters. It was almost as if there was a struggle going on. Men versus the ocean. I knew which one would win. The same as always.

A scream reached my ears, surprisingly clear despite the water. I had to admit my hearing was better than a human's, but that didn't mean it was easy to hear through so much space.

Without thinking, I changed directions and headed back to the surface only to be pushed back by Shelbie's cold nose on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I can't stop," I told her. "Now isn't play time."

She shook her head, the dark beady eyes somehow telling me what I already knew, the surface was too dangerous for me. And yet, even now I wanted to help. Something was encouraging me, wanting me to reach out and touch the shipwreck happening in front of my eyes. It must be one of the tourist boats I'd seen from a distance. Most of the newer ones were a lot sturdier and made of metal. The biggest threat to them was barnacles.

Which meant there were probably children on board. "I need to check everyone is okay," I told Shelbie.

The seal sighed. Or at least, she did the closest thing to sighing I could imagine a seal doing. It was hard to tell what she was thinking or feeling a lot of the time. But now, she'd let me go. More than that, she'd swim by my side too. I knew Shelbie well enough to know she'd never abandon me. We'd been inseparable since we were born.

The water grew lighter as I approached the surface, the sun warming it in a way we didn't experience down at the bottom. Though we also didn't need it, we'd evolved to be well insulated against the cold sea.

Water cascaded down my face as I broke the surface, leaving my long hair lying in clumps around me. One of the disadvantages of living underwater was that my hair never got to look good. I'd seen plenty of pictures of humans that made me jealous of that.

I looked over at the shipwreck, noticing a lifeboat full of humans already heading for the shore. I sighed in relief, that was something at least. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, especially not children. "It looks like they're all safe," I said to Shelbie as she popped above the waves with me.

She squeaked and pointed her head in another direction. I followed her gaze, trying to find what she was looking at and hoping it wasn't anything serious.

"Oh no." I dived back under the water and headed towards the man floating on debris. He needed help and everyone else already seemed to be gone. I was his only chance and there was no escaping that.

I powered through the ocean, my tail was good for that. Checking on my progress, my head broke above the waves to check where he was. Straight ahead. A few more swishes of my tail should do it.

I reached the piece of driftwood he was clinging to and steeled my courage. Now I was here, I wasn't too sure about the whole saving-someone thing. If I dared to admit it, I was almost nervous. What if I was too late? Or what if I wasn't and he didn't want help? It was a strange position to be in, knowing someone was between life and death.

"Hi." I leaned on the driftwood too, hoping I didn't startle him too much and send him falling back into the water to drown. That would be counterproductive to my plan.

"Hey." He coughed, water falling from his mouth.

"Oh no, are you okay?" I had no idea what to do with a human near the brink of death. It was pretty frowned upon in mermaid society to even help a human.

"I've been better. Were you on the boat? I don't recognise you?" His voice sounded smooth, almost like he hadn't just had a lungful of water. I pushed that thought away. I still needed to save him. It didn't matter if he was a good man or a bad one. I had a duty of care to him.

"No, I wasn't on the boat. They've left already," I responded.

"Oh." He glanced away and my heart went out for him. It couldn't be nice to have been left behind like that.

"But I can help you."

"You can?" His eyes lit up, giving his face a more youthful edge than previously. It was interesting, I'd judged him as five or six years older than me but now I wasn't so sure.

"Yes, but I need you to promise never to tell anyone how."

He nodded. "Anything, if you can help me."

"I can. I'm going to swim around to your side and then I need you to grab hold of me and not let go."

He nodded again.

Letting go of the driftwood, I dived back below the water and swam underneath, eager to get to the other side and help him.

The man flinched slightly when I popped back up but that didn't stop him from putting his arms around me. Certain he wasn't going to fall off, I set off for a hidden cove I'd heard about from my sister. I'd never visited before. I'd never even been above the surface this close to the city before, but I knew where it was and that it was hidden from view. There wasn't any safer place to leave an abandoned human and hope he managed to find his way back.

He didn't say a word as we swam. I didn't blame him. Even if he hadn't worked out what I was yet, the whole situation was a little bit messed up. He'd been abandoned by his own kind and saved by a woman he didn't know and had never seen before. A beautiful one at that. I wasn't going to deny how I looked. It was impossible to when my entire race was created to be beautiful and alluring for no apparent reason. The old tales suggested we used to trap humans with our charms, but I found that unlikely. We weren't a violent race.

The man grew heavier as we approached the shore, his weight threatening to drag me down. That wouldn't be a problem for me, but I suspected things would go very wrong if he spent too long beneath the surface. A weight lifted and I smiled to myself, realising Shelbie must be giving me a helping hand. Or head more like. I didn't look down, it would be too dangerous too, but I'd make sure I thanked her properly later.

With the shore just feet away, I flicked my tail a little harder, moving the two of us through the water with ease. I'd been careful up until now, not wanting to wear myself out before he was in sight of safety. But even as

weak as he was, he should be able to make it to the shore without me if he needed to.

My free hand landed on the soft stone and I sighed with relief. We'd made it. He was safe. I hoisted him out of the water, grateful when he grabbed hold of one of the boulders and pulled himself up. The man got to his feet a little shakily. He held out his hand and I shook my head.

"I can't come with you," I whispered, unsure how much I wanted to admit to him. I might have just saved his life but I wasn't an idiot. I didn't know how much the people on land knew about mermaids, and on the off chance it wasn't much, I didn't want to get caught.

"Why not?"

"The sea is my home," I replied.

"That's not possible."

Realising there wasn't any other way to convince him, I did the only thing I could think of and flicked my tail above the waves.

He gasped. "You're a mermaid."

"Yes." The moment the whispered word left my lips a sharp pain engulfed me. It ripped through my tail and up to where my heart was. Black spots swam across my eyes, blinding me from what was going on. All I knew was pain. I clutched at my chest, trying to stop whatever was happening. Something warm slipped through my fingers just as everything went black.

2

EVERYTHING CAME BACK SLOWLY. I could hear other mer around me even if I couldn't see them.

"Mari, what did I tell you about going to the surface?"

Pain zinged through me at my father's words. I hadn't meant to ignore his advice. And the resignation in his voice didn't make me feel any better. I almost wished he was angry. Then maybe I could work out a way to remind him I hadn't done what I did on purpose. I didn't want to destroy the secrecy surrounding mer.

I tried to force my eyes open but didn't get very far. A moan of pain slipping through my lips.

"You can't force it, Mari. You'll wake up soon," he promised, a comforting hand stroking my forehead. Dad had a way of making me feel safer than anyone. It was one of the most amazing things about him. He knew how to comfort.

I tried blinking again, this time managing to let a slither of light in. "I'm alive?" I croaked. Despite being aware of my surroundings, that fact still kind of surprised me. The pain I'd felt while falling through the sea had been unlike anything I'd ever imagined and death was the only thing I could think it went with.

"You are. But you're not the same," Dad said softly.

"What do you mean?" My voice sounded a little bit stronger and my eyes finally managing to open.

I frowned, I was in my room. Dad sat next to me, and Shelbie curled up at the end of the bed, right next to my tail. I worried about her, she'd need to go up for air soon and I knew she'd push it too far while I'd been unconscious.

Dad sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "How to tell you this..."

A stone dropped in my stomach. What could be so bad that Dad didn't even have a way to explain it without thinking about it first.

"You don't have a soul anymore."

My mouth fell open. "What?" I demanded.

"You don't have a soul anymore, Mari. It was taken from you. The ripping, the pain, that's what it was."

"How is that even possible?" I tried to make sense of what he was saying but got nowhere.

"It's a curse that was put on the mer long ago. If we go to the surface on the day of our eighteenth birthdays, or even before, then a human can steal our soul."

"Why would they even want to do that?" I asked, trying not to overthink about the human man I'd saved from the sea. I'd been a fool. He hadn't seemed like the type to hurt someone.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it isn't purposeful? All they have to do is get us to admit we're mer and then they can take our souls. I'm not sure what they do with them. Or even if they do anything, but that's what happens."

I pressed my hand to my heart, trying to work out if I was any different for missing such an important part of myself. On the surface, I thought not, but if I looked deeper, then maybe. Not in an obvious way, more in a slightly uncomfortable-there's-definitely-something-missing way.

"How many..."

"Hundreds. At least half of the mer here have had their souls taken. A lot in the older generations too. We don’t know how to stop the curse." Dad looked away, heartbreak in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I whispered. "Someone was dying. I had to save them."

His eyes filled with compassion. "You're the person I raised you to be if that's the case. Know I don't love you any less for lacking a soul."

"Thank you," I whispered, a tear threatening at the corner of my eye. I pushed it back. I was in this position because of myself. I was just lucky it wasn't going to affect too much in my life. "What do I do now?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "You just go on living your life as normal and don't tell anyone."

"And that's all that happens when you don't have a soul?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "No," he whispered, barely forming the word. "You won't be able to pass on to a better place if you don't have a soul. You'll be stuck between the heavens and the sea for all eternity, unable to take your place in either. Unable to interact with anyone."

"Ah." I tried to make sense of that but knew it would take more time for it to truly sink in and for me to know what to do with it. In some respects, it almost made no sense for me to go about my life. Not when it wouldn't make any difference to the outcome at the end. But I knew there was more to being a good person than that.

"We'll do everything possible to make life normal for you," Dad promised.

"I know." I paused for a moment, almost too scared to voice the question that was spinning around in my head. "Will anyone else be able to tell I don't have a soul?"

"No. They won't know unless they witnessed what happened today, or you tell them. There's only one person who can divine whether or not a mer has their soul still and she lives away from the rest of us."

I frowned again and tried to sit up, only for Dad to push me back down again. I hadn't realised anyone lived away from the main city. Most mer never left, some never even going up as far as the surface, though I knew most made at least one trip before deciding it wasn't for them.

"Who?"

"She calls herself the sea witch, but she's nothing of the sort. She's just another mer who didn't want to live here anymore." There was something else there. Something he wasn't telling me, and from the sad note in his voice, he wasn't going to tell me.

But that was okay. Dad couldn't be the only mer in the city who knew about this sea witch. I'd discover more about her and then do everything I could to find her. If she could tell whether or not a mer still held their soul, then maybe she knew how I could get mine back.

I didn't want to go through life knowing I was cursed at the end of it, and if this was the only way I could avoid that, then it was the path I was going to take.

3

IT TOOK me most of the day to find the cave where the sea witch was supposed to live. This was probably not my best idea, but it was the only one I had. Dad hadn't wanted to even tell me where she was, even though he was the one who told me she existed. I didn't understand, but that was a problem for another day. It wasn't like my fate could get any worse now. Lucky for me, he wasn't the only mer who knew where the sea witch lived, and I'd soon found myself in possession of the information I needed. Maybe I should feel guilty about that, but my soul was more important at this time.

The cave looked just like any other. I might even have passed it a time or two while I was out exploring with Shelbie. Yet I'd never realised someone lived there. Just another thing I should feel guilty for.

"Hello?" I called out, only half-convinced I'd get any answer at all.

Nothing.

What a surprise.

Despite the disappointment, I swam inside, Shelbie following just behind. I'd never leave her behind. Especially for something as important as this. She wouldn't let me either. Shelbie was my almost constant companion. She only left me when she had to go up for air.

"Hello?" I called again.

"Has no one ever told you it's rude not to knock?" an older voice replied.

I jumped, not having expected anyone to answer from behind me. I batted my tail, spinning myself in the sea and facing the woman now in front of me. She was beautiful, with icy blue hair and silver tail that glimmered in the light. A far more interesting combination than my own dark hair and green tail.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you, I just came to ask about..."

"Getting your soul back. Yes, I know. That's the only reason anyone comes here anymore. There's not much I can tell you though."

"Not much is better than nothing," I responded. "Please tell me."

She sighed. "Alright then, this way." She swam deeper into the cave, leaving me no choice but to follow.

I should have asked her name. Or made some other attempt to be more personable. Usually, I was good at that kind of thing. It was just the stress of the situation getting to me.

"Why don't you sit down?" She gestured towards a crude driftwood bench that she'd probably carved herself.

Not knowing what else to do, I perched myself on it, letting Shelbie rest on my lap.

"Do you have a name?" she asked, busying herself with something other than looking at me.

"Mari," I whispered, suddenly unsure of myself.

"Demetra," she responded.

"It's lovely to meet you. I've heard a lot about you," I lied.

She laughed. "I doubt that. Other mer only hear about me if they take the loss of their soul badly."

I shuffled uncomfortably.

"How did they get yours?"

"I saved a man," I answered, feeling monumentally stupid. "Why did no one warn me?" I asked.

"It feels like thousands of tiny knives are shredding the inside of our mouths if we try and tell children." She turned to study me, an intrigued look on her face. "You want to get your soul back, don't you?"

"Can I?" I didn't even try to cover up the eagerness in my voice.

"That depends. I've sent many a mer on a quest to get their soul back. None have returned yet. If you're willing to risk your life for your soul, then I can send you to the right place."

"And if I am?"

"What makes you so certain life isn't worth living without one?" she asked.

"I'm sure it is. It's not my life I'm worried about," I admitted.

"Surely you're a bit young to be thinking about death."

"Then let me go because I can save the other souls."

She paused, weighing up whether I was telling the truth. I was. Or at least, I thought I was. If I could save everyone, then I would. "Alright. But it will be dangerous."

"I didn't think it wouldn't be." Nothing about this situation felt right, and I knew that if there was even a chance of making it right and rejoining my soul and body once more, I had to take it.

"You'll need to go to land-"

"How? I don't have legs." I gestured towards my tail needlessly. She knew what I was, she didn't need telling that I couldn't walk on land.

"I have a potion for that. And for your pet too, if she wants to take it."

I stroked Shelbie's head, unsure how to answer that. I didn't want to risk anything happening to her, but I doubted she'd let me travel on land without her. It would certainly be nice to have company while undertaking the most dangerous trip of my life.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, young Mari. Remember my soul is also in your hands."

"Why haven't you gone after it yourself?" I asked, unable to keep my curiosity at bay.

"Because without it, I saw a few people for who they really were and, to me, that was worth the price I paid."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. People's true natures, both mer and human, are always worth knowing. Just remember that you shouldn't trust anyone's view of you until you've lost all value to them."

A chill swept through me. That wasn't a nice thing to consider at all. No one had treated me too badly yet, but maybe that was because they didn't know about my soulless state. Though it could have more to do with people's regards for Dad rather than anything else. Whatever it was, there was no rush to find out.

"How do I free the souls once I'm there?"

"That is unclear. I'm led to believe they'll be kept in some kind of container. If you break the chains that bind them, you should set them free."

"And it's as simple as that?"

She laughed bitterly. "Simple? Nothing about this is simple. First, you have to find the souls, then you have to work out how to break whatever it is binding them. No one has ever been successful, so we don't even know if that will be enough to recombine your body and soul either."

"Right." I nodded, at a complete loss for anything else to say. Of all the things I imagined could happen on my eighteenth birthday, it was safe to say that this was not one of them.

"Are you sure you want to take this quest on as your own?" she asked.

"I don't believe I have any choice," I responded. "If I don't, I'll be soulless. Maybe this way I can reunite some other people with theirs too." I

really hoped I could. I imagined being without a soul wasn't good for anyone.

"Don't trust anyone or anything when you're on land. You'll hear stories about a mermaid who fell in love with a Prince. Don't believe them. No man will be your salvation."

I frowned. I'd heard the story about the Prince before, but I couldn't recall the details. Needless to say, I wasn't very interested in anything a man could provide. I had one goal with going on land, and that was to free our souls. No one was going to distract me from that.

"Thank you for the advice."

"Are you still wanting to do this?" She gave me a disbelieving look, almost like she expected me to change my mind.

"Yes. I need to do this."

"Very well. Swim to the shore and drink this. Give the smaller bottle to your seal if she's willing to take it. The legs will hurt at first, but once you're used to them, they'll be less of an annoyance." She handed me two small vials of swirling blue liquid. "And good luck. You'll need it."

4

THE ROCKS CUT into my hands as I dragged myself up on to the shore. My tail was useless. I could already feel how it was going to get in the way.

"I guess this is it then," I said to Shelbie, who was still bobbing up and down in the water.

Taking the larger of the two vials, I uncorked it and drank the lot. It didn't taste bad. Far from it. There was just no taste at all.

Discarding it, I looked back at Shelbie. "Do you want to join me?"

She made a sharp movement which I assumed was a yes, though I wasn't too sure. Even so, I leaned down and scooped her up, thankful for the strong muscles in my tail for keeping me steady.

"You don't have to drink this if you don't want," I told her, determined not to put her in harm's way.

She opened her mouth wide, clearly giving me permission to drop the liquid in.

I took a deep breath. If this was what she wanted too, then there would be no arguing with her. She'd follow me on land whether she had a suitable form or not, and I was under no illusions what they'd do to a random seal caught on land. That wasn't going to happen on my watch. She was far too precious to me.

She licked her lips the moment the potion slipped down her throat. Here went nothing.

I waited, unsure of what to expect. After what felt like forever, my tail began to tingle, and the green colour started to fade. A sharp pain sliced the middle of me and I almost screamed out. At least it wasn't as bad as losing my soul had been. Though maybe it was. Perhaps I just couldn't feel pain like I used to because the part of me that felt it had been destroyed.

That was messed up. I was missing being in pain.

Looking down, I found two perfectly formed legs in front of me. I wiggled my new toes, surprised at how easy it was. Turning over so I was on my hands and knees, I tried to push myself into a vertical position. That was what all the humans I'd ever seen had done with their legs.

The moment my feet were under me, I wobbled and fell on my ass.

"Ow." Alright, I could still feel pain then. I'd just been being melodramatic before.

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, hoping it would centre me and let me focus on getting my body under control. I didn't want to fail before I'd even begun.

"Start by putting your clothes on," a male voice said.

I craned my neck around, surprised to be hearing anyone. The man wasn't anything like I expected. He couldn't have been any older than I was and he shimmered in the sunlight. Was he a ghost? Or just some figment of my imagination. Either seemed more likely than him being human.

"Hello?" A figment of my imagination wouldn't respond to a simple greeting. Somehow, I knew that would be true.

"Hi," he responded, giving me an awkward wave. "You brought clothes? Right?"

I nodded. The sea witch had given me a waterproof bag filled with all the things I might need as soon as I reached land. Once I'd reunited our

souls with our bodies, I'd make sure she got the recognition she deserved for the part she played in saving so many people.

"I suggest you put them on before you stand up. If one of the humans sees you before you do, you'll end up arrested.

My eyes widened. I didn't want that. I hadn't realised that being naked would be such a problem on land, it was the norm beneath the water. I should have known. Otherwise, the sea witch wouldn't have sent clothes with me.

Rummaging through the bag, I pulled out what she'd placed there, noting how sturdy the material seemed to be. And how black. It wasn't a colour I particularly liked, but right now, I didn't have much choice and would wear what I was given.

With a lot of fumbling, I managed to dress myself, conscious of the man's eyes on me but not intimidated by it. It almost felt like he was another mer, and not someone I needed to worry about at all.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"Someone like you," he answered cryptically.

I twisted around properly now I was dressed and took another good look at him. He clearly wasn't mer, which could only mean that what he had in common with me was the state of his soul.

I nodded, not wanting to voice the weakness out loud. Instead, I looked over to where Shelbie had curled up after taking her version of the potion, only to find a black dog in her place, about the same size as she'd been, but a lot fluffier.

"Shelbie?" I asked.

She bounded over and pushed a head beneath my hand. I scratched absentmindedly, no doubt in my mind that this was the same animal I'd spent most of my life around, even if she looked a little different. Which hardly mattered really. I looked different too.

"Did the sea witch send you?" I asked the man, eager to know where he'd come from.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, she didn't. I only came here because I saw you struggling."

"And you knew how to help?"

He shrugged. "I had a vague idea. Not many mer come on land."

"I'm starting to understand why." I pressed my hand to my stomach, mourning the loss of the thing I'd never even thought about before.

"Are you ready to try and stand again?" I didn't call him out on changing the subject. Not when I was almost glad he had.

"Yes, please."

"Okay. You need to go slowly. Remember when you first learned to swim?"

I nodded. The whole process had been torture from start to finish. But at the end of it, there had been nothing more wondrous than the ability to travel on my own.

"This is a bit like that. Don't move too quickly at first. You'll have to find a new centre of balance while you walk. But you'll pick it up quickly. I've never seen a mer not."

How old was he? He might look my age, but if he was talking about all the mer he'd seen come on land, then he couldn't be. As far as I knew, no one had even ventured this far in years. No one dared to. At least I now understood why.

Following his advice, and stifling my questions, for now, I got to my feet. My whole body trembled, not used to the distribution of my weight like this. I couldn't let myself falter though. I had too much I needed to achieve, the last thing I wanted was to collapse again and draw it out longer than I had to.

"Brilliant. Now take a step forward," he instructed.

Slowly, I put one foot in front of the other. Shelbie rushed around my feet, not needing nearly as long to acclimatise to the new set of legs. Why couldn't I have it as easy?

Another step forward. Another. Another.

I laughed. This wasn't too bad. I could feel what the man meant about my centre of balance, but other than that, I felt like I was getting the hang of this.

"You're doing well."

It was only then that I realised I didn't know his name. Nor did he know mine. Maybe that was more purposeful than I first thought. Or maybe it was just rude of me not to ask.

"What's your name?" I risked.

"Aaron. Yours?"

"Mari." I stumbled, and he reached out to catch me, only for his hands to go through me. "You're not..."

"I can be," he cut me off. "Sometimes. But not as often as I'd like."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Don't be. You didn't do anything to make this happen." Something unfamiliar crossed across his face. If it had made any sense to me, I'd have said it was hope I saw. But that couldn't possibly be right.

"I'm here to free mer souls. Maybe if I find them, I can find yours too?" I ventured, hoping I was right in thinking that was what we had in common. It was what made the most sense to me, but it might insult him more than I'd intended to if I was wrong.

"I doubt you can, but thank you for the offer." He seemed sincere, but I didn't like the way he seemed so defeated about it.

"I can at least try."

He nodded. "Maybe. But I won't hold my breath. You have my promise of help, so long as I'm able."

"Thank you." I was certain my eyes lit up at the offer. Any help was greatly appreciated. Especially if it came from a handsome, if somewhat transparent, man.

I looked around, trying to work out which way I needed to go.

"That way." Aaron pointed towards a gap in the rocks. "It'll take you towards the city. After that, you'll have to find your own way."

"Thanks," I said again. I wasn't even sure I'd have gotten this far without him. I hoped his offer of help was a sincere one. I was going to need it if I was going to save the mers' souls.

And I was going to succeed. No matter what it took.

5

I CAUGHT myself on the wall, not wanting to admit that I was struggling to walk, but having to slow down for fear of doing some permanent damage to my now human body. I'd never had to deal with being this breakable and it wasn't a great feeling.

"Are you okay?" a somewhat familiar male voice asked.

I looked up, unsure who I'd find until the dark hair clicked into place.

"You?" I asked, feeling my eyes widen.

Something odd crossed across his face. Almost like shock. But it was gone before I could confirm what it was lurking in his eyes.

"Yes, me. But only because of you." He gave me a charming smile.

"I'm glad you made it alright." A warm glow filled me as the realisation sunk in. He was only alive because of me. I'd made a difference in someone's life. Maybe that was worth losing my soul over. Who would decide that? I supposed it depended whether or not there was a god. Or gods. I wasn't picky about which.

"I did. Thank you for that."

We stood looking at each other awkwardly. I had no idea what etiquette was expected on land when it came to situations like this.

"Would you like to go for a drink?" he asked.

Would I? Was that the kind of thing I should agree to?

I nodded, unsure what else to do. "That would be lovely."

"I know a quiet place down the street here, you can tell me how you gained legs." He gave me another winning smile.

"Alright, but I might need a hand getting there." I gestured down at my legs, already teetering unsteadily again. It was taking longer than I wanted to accept to get used to them.

A gust of wind blew past me. That was odd. It had been such a calm day up until that random gust. Was there something in that?

"What's your name?" I asked as he slipped an arm around my waist and helped me to stand.

"Erickson. Yours?"

"Mari." Maybe I should have given him a false name, but it was too late to second guess myself now, we were already on our way to the counter.

"I have a lot of questions for you, Mari."

"I hope you'll answer some for me too," I responded, hobbling along with his help. At least I wasn't falling over still. That would be embarrassing. Shelbie darted in front of us, yapping and checking on me. That was something at least. She hadn't been changed at all by her transformation into a dog.

"Here we are." He pointed towards a small cafe with his free hand.

Had he purposefully ignored my question? I didn't dwell on that too much. I wasn't in the habit of not trusting people. Perhaps I should be after what happened to my soul and the advice I'd been given. In his case, it seemed like I should though. I'd saved his life, which meant he owed me.

The inside of the cafe was warm and homey, with worn wooden tables and comfortable looking chairs. Far more comfortable than the ones we had under the sea. Apparently, that was one of the advantages of living on land. Though so far, I hadn't seen enough of those to want to stay here permanently.

"Two hot chocolates please, Linda." He gave one of his smiles to the woman behind the counter. That was just how he was then, and not something to do with me. It was certainly worth remembering in the long run. The last thing I wanted was to end up infatuated with a man who wanted nothing from me but information. "Here we go." He helped me into one of the chairs and I finally relaxed.

"Thank you," I said as Shelbie curled up next to me, pushing her furry back against my legs and offering me a surprising amount of reassurance. As much as I didn't like the idea of putting her in danger, I was glad she was here and reminding me of home.

"It's no problem. Just an excuse to come and get hot chocolate. I'm never going to pass that opportunity by."

I smiled at him, unsure of what to do or say. Hot chocolate was something I'd heard about but never tried. Drinks weren't precisely necessary while under water. It was one of the many advantages we had.

The woman from the counter bustled over and put them down in front of us. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you, Linda." Another smile. I was starting to grow tired of the sweetness he exuded. It felt wrong, even if I couldn't quite work out why.

I pulled the mug towards me, noting how hot it was and that I shouldn't drink it straight away.

"What's brought you to land?" he asked, stirring his drink with one of the tiny spoons Linda had brought.

"Something was stolen from me when I came above the surface." Technically not a lie. It was all I was going to tell him for now.

"Oh no, I'm sorry." The shifty look was back, but I dismissed it. He'd nearly died the other day, there was no way he knew any more about the problem than I did.

"Don't be. It's a problem that's been plaguing my people for a long time. I promised them when I came to land, I'd try and sort it for us all." It was my turn to smile at him, though I wasn't feeling it very much. The loss of my soul wasn't something to be light-hearted and sweet about.

"I'm sorry to hear that." He took a sip of his drink, leaving the two of us in a somewhat uncomfortable silence.

This wasn't going well, but I lacked any clue about how to extract myself from the situation without looking rude. Or like I suspected him of being the one who did the stealing. Obviously, he hadn't. He'd been so close to the edge of death that he couldn't possibly have taken my soul.

"Have you heard any legends about mermaid souls?" I asked, hoping I wasn't giving too much away.

"Not really." He shrugged. "There's one old tale that says a mermaid soul can allow a man to live forever."

"That sounds like an awfully long time."

He laughed loudly. "There's no truth in it. Most people don't even believe that mermaids are real. I can't say I did until the other day."

I picked up my mug to take a drink, mostly so I didn't have to respond to his unspoken question. I wasn't ready to tell him any more about my people than I had to. It wasn't my place to tell anyone anything, and I would stick to that.

A wind whistled past me again. There was definitely something odd about it. Shelbie raised her head, clearly alerted to something by it. Was there a chance that the wind was Aaron trying to tell me something? Even if it was, I had no idea what he was trying to say and that made his communication almost useless. We'd have to work on that in the future.

"Are there many of you on land?" Erickson asked.

"I don't know." That was the truth at least. For all I knew, every other person in this room was a mermaid with legs. I doubted it. There weren't so many of us that I wouldn't notice if people kept disappearing.

"That's no fun."

"Sorry, we don't talk much about being on land." Not a lie. He didn't need to know that we couldn't talk about it even if we wanted to. Well, sort of. It was just the curse we couldn't talk about as far as I knew.

"So why are you here?"

"I told you, something was stolen from me the day I saved you."

"You weren't carrying anything, were you?"

"No." There was no use in denying it. I'd used both of my arms to save him and he'd seen my tail. Unless I tried to pretend we had a special pouch in our tail that we could use as some kind of purse, I had no chance of convincing him I'd been carrying anything of any value.

I supposed I could pretend it had been jewellery, but then why would I be so certain it was on land?

There really was nothing for it. I had to tell him the truth.

Another whistle of wind had me rethinking my decision, but I needed to find my soul somehow, and this just might be the way.

"My soul was stolen," I whispered.

"Your soul?" Erickson echoed.

Foreboding filled me, no doubt spurred on by whatever weird thing Aaron was trying to do. I ignored it. The damage was done now, and there was nothing I could do about that.

"Yes, my soul," I replied.

"Do mermaids even have souls?"

"Of course we have souls," I snapped, before realising it wasn't true. Only some of us had souls. The rest of us were relegated to my status. Though I'd never noticed any mer being treated any differently from the others.

"But not you?"

I sighed. "No, not me. That's why I came to land. I'd really like to get it back." I rubbed a hand over my face, trying not to let my emotions show in

the way of tears. The last thing I wanted was for him to think I was weak and decide not to help me.

"Do you know where to start?"

I shook my head. "That's the problem. I don't even know what I'm looking for, but I feel lost without it."

He studied me intently. "I might have an idea, but you're going to have to trust me."

I nodded eagerly. "Of course. Anything you need." What was I doing? This wasn't the sensible course of action. I barely knew him and yet here I was taking his help? Maybe I'd lost my common sense along with my soul.

"It'll be evening soon, we should get you somewhere to sleep. I have a spare room?"

"You do?" I perked up. Anything where I could get comfortable. And used to my legs.

"Yes. Why don't we go get you settled in? Then I have a couple of people I can ask questions of. Hopefully, we can get some pointers for the direction we need to take.

"Thank you."

He gave me another one of the charming smiles before rising to his feet and going to pay the woman behind the counter.

I'd either just made the best decision of my life. Or the worst.

6

I STUDIED THE ROOM INTENTLY. It was so different from what I was used to, but I could definitely see the comfort in it. The bed bounced up and down beneath me, and the blankets looked far softer than the seaweed ones I used back home. But that didn't mean anything. I had a feeling sleeping while on land was going to be completely different from underwater. That wasn't going to be helpful. I needed to be well rested if I was going to have any chance of finding the souls.

A cool wind ruffled my hair.

"Aaron?" I called out into the room, hoping he'd answer and give me some explanations about what he'd been up to earlier. It wasn't like I could interpret random air signals. No one could, and I had an even bigger disadvantage just by being from the sea.

Shelbie snored from her spot on the bed. She'd had no problems adjusting to life on land. Or the bed. In fact, she seemed to be particularly fond of the bed.

Aaron shimmered into being in front of me, gaining some kind of form in front of me.

I sighed with relief. At least he was still with me. "Is everything okay?" I asked him.

"You shouldn't trust this man," he warned me.

"Erickson?"

"Is that his name?" He frowned, the expression odd considering there wasn't any physical being to him.

"Yes. He's been nice. Bought me hot chocolate, given me somewhere to stay..."

"Trusting humans is a bad idea, Mari," he warned. I supposed there was some truth in that. Before this, my experience with the human world had just been my soul getting stolen.

"I'm not trusting him," I promised. "Far from it. I'm just accepting his hospitality and finding out what I can."

His expression said he didn't believe me, but I had no idea how to change that. Or why he felt that way. I wasn't being a fool. Was I? Erickson had been nothing but nice to me. The same went for Aaron. It was hard to know who to trust when I'd only just met both of them at the start of this specific quest.

"Just make sure you remember that," Aaron repeated.

I dismissed the sense of foreboding that ran through me. Without knowing what it was about, there was very little I could do about it.

I used to think I was intelligent, now I was learning just how much I didn't know.

"Do you know where I need to be heading?" I asked, hoping he'd have at least some information on where I could start my search for the souls.

"I'm sorry, Mari."

I sighed. I hadn't expected him to have any answers. How could he, when I had none myself? Maybe I'd been foolish to take this quest on in the first place. I wasn't anywhere near experienced or equipped for it.

"How did you know I was soulless?" I asked. "When we met."

"Your aura."

"My aura?" I'd not even realised I had one. But then, I was just finding out just how many gaps in my knowledge I had.

"Yes. Everyone has one. I can teach you to look for it." He gave me an expectant look, before realising what he was doing. "If you want, that is."

"I would. " I nodded enthusiastically. If it would help me find the souls, then it was definitely something I wanted and needed to learn to do. Then I might not have to rely on Erickson for finding where I needed to be. The chances of him actually finding the souls already seemed slim.

"Close your eyes," he instructed.

I felt him move so he was sitting next to me, the bed dipping with his weight despite the fact he wasn't corporal. That was slightly odd, but I didn't question it too much. I didn't know much about his kind, which meant I shouldn't question it. Especially when we barely knew each other and he was doing everything he could to help me.

"Picture Shelbie, but not her physical form, just the part that makes her Shelbie."

"How do you know her name?" I frowned but didn't open my eyes.

"You've used it at least a dozen times in my presence."

"Oh." That did make sense. I talked to her all the time, even without meaning to.

I dismissed my train of thought and focused on what he'd asked me to do. Lots of things made my pet herself. Her loyalty, her sense of fun, her love of chasing bubbles...

"Open your eyes and look at her."

To my surprise, there was a faint glow around her. I wouldn't have called it strong enough to be a soul, but it was definitely something. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's her feelings. Right now, she's content and sleeping, so there isn't much to see. But it'll subtly change colour when her mood changes," he explained.

"Oh." That could be useful. I'd always found myself worrying about whether Shelbie was happy or not. I hoped she was, but had no proof. If this trick worked, I'd know for sure all the time. "But how does that help me with finding souls?" That bit didn't make sense to me yet. Not at all.

"Because people without souls don't have the colours around them. Not even the soft grey."

I looked at him, testing what he was saying. "But how do I know if I'm just not managing to look properly, or if the person has no soul?"

"You'll know."

I studied him a bit longer, but no colours appeared. Shelbie's still existed in the corner of my vision though, so I knew I was seeing properly.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

His smile was no less charming than Erickson's, but somehow felt more genuine, like he didn't have to force it. Though I suspected that could just be me projecting onto the two of them. Erickson was human, which meant I had an inherent mistrust, even if he hadn't done anything to deserve that. I needed to do a better job of breaking free of prejudice. It didn't reflect well on me, or on my people.

I placed my hand over his, sinking through the transparent flesh.

"Will you ever have a full body?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it. I think my time in a body has long since passed."

"You used to have one?"

Something odd crossed his face. Like he wasn't sure how to answer me. Even that in itself told me what I needed to know. He had a body at one point, but didn't now. I had to wonder what had changed for him and what that meant for me. Hopefully nothing, but it did make me a little warier knowing he wasn't telling me the full truth about himself.

"It's a long time since I thought about having a physical form. Let's just leave it at that."

I didn't try and convince him otherwise. I knew the conversation was over and didn't want to press my luck in getting him to continue against his will.

7

WATER PRESSED in all around me, demanding I did something about the terrible situation I'd ended up in. I could see other mer around me, each trying to speak to me. No doubt to tell me they wanted their souls back. Some were even shouting that it was my fault they'd lost it in the first place.

I shook my head. That couldn't be right. No one had lost their soul since me, there hadn't been time. And even if there had been, I was certain dad would be keeping a closer eye on everyone now I'd disappeared. Maybe I should have told him where I was going and what I planned to do. No doubt he'd worked it out, but it might have been better actually coming from me.

"It's all your fault, Demetra," one of the mer spat out.

Wait...Demetra? That wasn't my name. The only person I'd met with that name was the woman who helped me assure. Was this vision something to do with her? Was *I* now her? That was confusing at the best of times, but my curiosity stopped me from doing anything to stop the vision occurring.

"I promise, it isn't, this has been going on far longer than any of us have been alive," I countered, though I had no control over the words. It was an odd feeling.

"How do we know you're not lying? You've always been an odd one. Always off on your own doing other things..."

"I was trying to find a way for us to break the curse," I insisted.

A merman swam up to me, his features instantly recognisable but a lot younger than I'd ever seen them. I lifted my hand, wanting to reach out and touch him.

Dad. He could help me. He'd be on my side, surely?

"What did you do, Demetra?" He sighed, as if he was out of patience with me. But that made no sense. Dad was always patient with me. Always kind. He didn't even raise his voice when he was angry. This was worse than anger though. This was a disappointment.

"Rhiadon, I did nothing, I swear." Dad's name felt both weird and familiar on my tongue.

"How can I believe you?"

"Please, Rhiadon. You know me. I wouldn't do something like this. I wouldn't betray our people..."

"Enough," he snapped. "We can't trust you, Demetra. You went to the surface when you were specifically told not to, and you caused three others to follow you and lose their souls. You know what the punishment for that is."

There was a punishment? Why hadn't he inflicted it on me?

"No!" I cried out. I hadn't meant to, but there was nothing I could do to stop myself. I wasn't in control of my own body, that was for sure.

"You've left me no choice. I'm sorry." The look on his face conveyed the truth in his words. "Don't return to the city. You're banished."

Tears stung at the corners of my eyes, but I steadied my face. With all the salty sea water around, no one would ever know that I'd been crying if I kept a steady face.

My heart cracked in my chest at my dad's loss, though it wasn't like I'd expected losing a family member to feel. This was soul crushing. Or it would be, if I had a soul. Perhaps luckily, I lacked just that.

Blackness swirled across my vision, and I thrashed around, unable to tell what was happening. Something tightened around me, and I tried to break free.

The murkiness cleared and I found myself staring into a mirror. My reflection was beautiful and familiar, even if it wasn't my face looking back at me. Somehow, I knew this was all happening in my head but wasn't able to wake myself from it. Which just led to the question of whether these were Demetra's memories, or if they were just my imagination making things up.

The rest of the cave was almost exactly as I remembered from my own visit. With one exception...

"What were you thinking?" he asked, clearly exasperated by my actions. I jumped at the sound of my dad's voice, but only in my mind. Demetra had expected him to be there, so our body hardly responded at all.

"The youngsters were heading towards land, I had no choice," I responded.

"Why didn't you just leave them be..."

"Would you really still love me if I'd turned my back on them? They were talking about finding a prince on land, like the legends. The poor fools would have found themselves dead as well as soulless." Remorse filled me. I hadn't been able to stop them from forfeiting their souls, losing my own in the process.

"There was one day left, Demetra. One day. I was going to ask your father if I could marry you..."

"You still could." I crossed my arms and levelled my gaze at him. "With the position you hold, you could tell everyone that my version of events is the real one and still marry me. You probably wouldn't have to ask my father's permission now I have no soul."

"I can't marry you, Demetra. You know that."

I laughed bitterly. This explained so much of the coldness between my parents. They'd never married for love. Not if what I was seeing had really happened.

"Of course. We wouldn't want you tarnishing your precious reputation now, would we?"

"It's not like that..." dad started, but I had no doubt about his insincerity.

My heart broke for Demetra. Though a part of me appreciated her even more. If she'd known whose daughter I was, she'd helped me anyway. Though maybe I was just part of some elaborate form of revenge against dad. With everything I was seeing, that seemed likely. But if it was, then why show me this?

"Please leave, Rhiadon, you're no longer welcome here."

"I can still come visit..."

"So, I can be your mistress? Absolutely not. I am worth more than that. Whoever you choose to marry and have children with is worth more than that. I will live alone before I am anything more to you. Stay faithful to your wife, Rhiadon, or your children shall be soulless like me." I turned away from him, my heart breaking. Not just once either. My heart broke as Demetra, and then again for her. I loved dad, but this was a side of him I'd never seen. A side I wasn't sure I liked. One I'd have to deal with once I returned to the water. I couldn't ignore what I'd learned.

"Are you cursing me, Demetra?" There was no ignoring the threat low in his voice. I would have said in this instant that he was more of a threat than Demetra ever was.

"As if I'd know how," I responded. "Make me out to be the witch as much as you want, but you won't force that title on me."

"If I ever find my children become soulless..."

"Then you can send them to me and I'll do what I can to undo it. I will not stand by and watch children suffer." I still wasn't looking at him. I

couldn't. There was too much pain and too much anger underneath everything the two of us were saying.

He didn't respond. After a few steadying breaths, I turned around, knowing he would be gone already. Rhiadon was never a man to hang around longer than he needed to. Hurt blossomed in my heart at how little I'd meant to him.

The blackness returned, and this time, I didn't fight it. I knew that whatever I was seeing, I needed to see and if I relaxed into it, I'd have an easier time of it.

It cleared again and left me with one of the trippiest sights I'd ever seen. I watched my conversation with Demetra from my current point of view. Why was it I'd never noticed how young and naive I looked? No wonder I'd managed to lose my soul. One look at me was enough to know I'd be an easy target.

I watched myself swimming away, trying not to have a crisis about the situation. The last thing I needed was to send myself crazy when I wasn't.

"Good luck, Mari. You're going to need it," Demetra-me said aloud, knowing my other self wouldn't hear me.

Shelbie turned around in the water, fixing Demetra-me with a look I'd never seen from her before. It was like she knew all the history behind this encounter. Demetra’s thoughts revealed her hoped to never have to send Rhiadon's daughter off to search for her soul. She’d hoped he'd have taken better care of her. He should have done. He should have found a way to make her understand what was at stake, even if he couldn't tell her without the pain.

She’d I hoped he'd learned after what happened to her. She should have known better. He was only ever out for one thing, and it wasn't his child. No doubt if she hadn't come to her, she'd have been banished just as she was. Though maybe not, she hadn't caused three other mermaids to lose their souls too.

The images began to fade, leaving only the sensation of Demetra's broken heart. Despite everything, it still beat strongly. And now it had a companion: my own.

8

A WHIMPER ROUSED me from my sleep. My eyes stuck together as I tried to open them, determined to see if Shelbie was okay. She didn't usually make noises like that and I wanted to stop them before it became anything more serious. The last thing I wanted was my poor companion to be unhappy.

"What is it, girl?" I asked sleepily, scratching her head even in my half-awake state. Petting her was one of the most natural parts of my day.

I remembered what Aaron had taught me the day before and focused on the area around her. A soft orange glow enveloped her, and somehow, I knew that was a concern. Maybe my lesson with Aaron had gone better than I thought.

A soft knocking pulled my attention away from Shelbie's dark fur.

"Hello?" I called out.

The door creaked open and Erickson stepped in with a steaming mug in his hand and a what looked like a hunk of bread.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't realise you wouldn't be dressed." He averted his eyes from my chest.

"Why would that matter?" I frowned. What was wrong with him.

"It's not proper for a man to see a woman's breasts unless they're together." His cheeks flamed red.

"Oh." I hadn't even thought about that cultural difference, even if I was dimly aware of it. I pulled the sheet up to cover my breasts, hoping it would be enough to make him more comfortable again. "It's safe to look, "I told him.

He looked back up and flashed me one of his smiles. "Thank you. It hadn't even crossed my mind that you might be used to different ways of acting."

"Me neither. I'll make sure I ask in future if something feels off," I responded.

"I brought you tea and some breakfast. but I don't know what you like."

"That's okay, I don't know what I like either," I responded.

"I just brought some bread. It's nothing fancy, but it is good." He offered it to me, and I took it gracefully.

I moved the bread to my nose, sniffing it and enjoying the new smell. Something about it just made me think of the sensation of warmth. I nibbled on it, not knowing what to expect. It tasted good. Not quite what I expected, but certainly pleasant.

Erickson passed me the mug of tea, and I took it. Just like with the bread, this wasn't something I'd ever had before, but the heat coming from the mug certainly seemed like a good thing to wake me up.

I blew across the top of the mug before taking a sip.

"This is delicious."

"Thanks. I didn't know how you'd like it. I drink it with milk, but I guessed that might be a little strange for you, so used honey." He shifted from side to side, distinctly uncomfortable with being in the room with me. Or nervous. He might just be that. I doubted he'd woken up a mermaid every morning, never mind brought her food she may or may not like.

"I like it."

Shelbie's tail beat against my legs as she eyed the bread in my hand. I chuckled and set down my mug of tea. Her head followed every movement

as I ripped off a piece and fed it to her.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that for dogs..."

"She's not a real dog though," I countered, not taking my eyes from my constant companion.

Part of me wished I'd had longer on my own so I could sort out the mess that was my dream. Or vision? It wasn't clear which of the two it was. Deep down, I knew what I'd seen had really happened, though I didn't know how that made me feel. Dad had been a constant in my life, and to find out he wasn't who I thought he was...it stung.

Then again, maybe he was exactly who I thought he was. He could have changed since the last time Demetra saw him. In reality, what I'd seen didn't change anything. At least, not for now. When I got home, if I got home, then I might need to act on some of what I'd learned. But for now, I was safe just to carry on with my mission. If anything, I was more convinced than ever that I needed to find the souls. Demetra had shown her true self when she'd helped me despite what my dad had done to her. I couldn't let that go to waste.

"Are you okay?"

"Sorry." I shook my head, clearing it of errant thoughts. "I'm not used to sleeping on a bed like this. It was a little on the strange side."

"I should have thought. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" He was still standing in the middle of the room, looking both like he belonged and utterly out of place.

"No, thank you. But why don't you sit down?" I waved towards the end of the bed. There was plenty of space there.

He grinned and sat down, leaning against the wall and looking instantly more comfortable. "Are you missing the sea?"

"Every moment," I answered honestly. "The sea is in my blood. It's everything I am and I can't resist the pull it has over me. Every moment I'm away from it, my heart yearns a little more." There's a wistfulness in my

voice that I couldn't ignore, and I was sure that Erickson had heard it in every word.

"I'm sorry you've had to come to land."

I laughed lightly. "You don't need to be sorry. It's not your fault my soul was stolen. I'll probably never know who it was that did." And I had to admit that bugged me. I wanted to be able to look the thief in the eye and make him understand what he'd done by taking my soul. That mer were worth the same as any human. We weren't lesser beings and shouldn't be treated that way.

He gave me a weak smile, nothing like the charming ones he'd given me the day before. Maybe he was just becoming more comfortable around me and able to show his true emotions rather than the mask he showed the world.

"Even so, I'm sorry someone did that to you."

I didn't know what made me do it, but I focused on the area around him, looking for his aura to see how he was feeling. It was harder than it had been with Shelbie. Maybe because he was a human and not an animal? I scrunched up my face, trying to make the aura appear. No matter what I did, it didn't seem to be happening.

A bright light from the side caught my attention. That was odd. Shelbie had an aura, and yet nothing was showing for Erickson yet.

Wait...did that mean...

"You're soulless too?" My eyes widened as I said the words. I hadn't even realised that humans could lose their souls. But then, if mer could have them stolen, then why couldn't others too? We were all created equal after all.

"What?" He seemed alarmed, but I couldn't put my finger on why that might be.

"You don't have a soul," I said, drawing out my words a little more. I wasn't sure how it would make things more transparent, but it seemed to

help.

"Oh, right. How did you know?" His eyebrows knit together, confusion coming off him in waves. Not that I could see it in his aura. That thing was as dead as mine and Aaron's was.

"You don't have an aura," I admitted. "Only soulless people don't have them." I would have to thank Aaron for teaching me how to read them when I next saw him. It was certainly a useful trick, that was for sure.

"Oh."

"It's okay, I understand how you feel," I reassured him, leaning in and covering his hand with mine. Though I still made sure to keep the sheet over my breasts. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable again. "It's not something I'd want to admit to people."

"Then why did you tell me?" His eyes bored into me, leaving me nowhere to hide.

"I don't know, you have an honest face?" I shrugged.

Shelbie started nudging on my arm, so I leaned back and let her under, leaving Erickson's hand to sit alone on the covers.

"I'm glad you feel that way."

"Is this why you agreed to help me?" I asked. "Find the souls, I mean? Are you hoping yours will be there too?"

"Souls?"

Oh. Oops. I hadn't realised I hadn't told him about looking for the other souls.

"I just thought if I found mine, I might be able to find the souls of the other mer who've had theirs stolen too. Hopefully, it won't be more difficult to save many souls than just one."

"Ah, yes that does make sense. I mean, I hoped we could find mine too, but I doubt they keep the human and mer souls in the same place."

"We can look for it afterwards if they don't?" I already felt brighter having someone to share my plight with. If he had just as much at stake in

this, then it explained why he wanted to help me.

A breeze whistled past me. Aaron. With him around as well, I felt even more at ease about the whole situation.

"What was that?" Erickson looked around the room as if he hoped to find whatever it was that had made the breeze.

"What was what?" I didn't know what it was that made me keep quiet about Aaron, but I didn't want to tell him about the other man. And that was my prerogative.

"Oh, nothing. It can't have been anything important," he muttered, waving my concern away.

Hmm. I wondered what that meant? And why Aaron didn't want to be seen by the human. For now, I'd keep them separate.

"There's some fresh clothes on the chair there, if you want them. Then we can head out and try and find the souls. I think I have a lead," he told me.

I perked up at that. The sooner I found them, the sooner I could head back to the sea. I sneaked a glance at Erickson. Though maybe by the end, I wouldn't want to go back. That was something I'd deal with if, and when, I had to.

9

I DIDN'T WANT to admit it out loud, but the size of the buildings intimidated me. We built upwards in the city under the sea too, but it wasn't anything like this. There, I was able to swim to the surface to get away from them. Here, not so much. I actually felt jealous of Aaron and his ability to turn into a wisp of air. It would make the whole place much less imposing.

Shelbie barked at nothing, her attention completely grabbed by whatever it was that had distracted her. For all I knew, it could be nothing more than a strange smell coming from the bakery down the street. Or a cat. At least I felt prepared for the human world in some ways. I knew what things were and how to use them thanks to the mer who'd successfully been here and passed down stories. Not one of them had lost their soul though. Probably because they hadn't been idiots and gone above the water before eighteen.

I tripped over my own feet, catching myself on a nearby wall.

"How long does it take to get used to these things?" I asked Erickson, not really expecting an answer.

He shrugged. "We normally learn to walk at between nine months and a year old."

"A year?" I echoed. That was just...I couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

"Well, it depends on the child and the environment, but that's about average. Normally we're walking well by the time we're fourteen months old."

"Fourteen?"

"You seem confused."

"I am a bit." I pushed away from the wall and steadied myself, trying to find the centre of gravity that worked for me best. "First off, I don't have a year to learn how to walk."

"That's true." He chuckled. "Though you do seem to mostly have the hang of it."

I didn't tell him that was because my legs were created with magic and that probably gave me a head start.

"When did you learn to swim?" he asked, apparently not noticing my silence.

"I didn't. We're born able to swim." Which was why the whole walking thing surprised me. How did humans get along with being so vulnerable while they were children? That just seemed dangerous.

"I've heard babies can swim as soon as they're born too," he mused. "But most parents don't leave them in the water long enough."

"That's a shame. There's nothing as beautiful as being able to go for a swim."

He scoffed. "I wouldn't be so sure."

"Have you been back in the water since?"

"In two days? Heck, no. I've stayed well away and plan to for a long time to come."

My heart sank despite my wishes. If he didn't like the sea, then there was no chance for the two of us to have anything more than friendship for

now. I wasn't sure why that disappointed me as much as it did. I'd work it out later.

"Sorry, I hadn't considered how short an amount of time it had been," I admitted.

"That's okay. It's not anything against the sea, but I can see how it would bother you, even if I don't mean it to." He held out his arm, and I took it gratefully. I needed as much help as I could get.

"I know. I feel the same about land sometimes. We've lived all of our lives in one place, the other is as foreign to us as anything. Just like it's taking me time to get used to land, I'm sure it's just the same for you and the sea."

"Maybe."

I stumbled forward, glad for the support he was offering. Without it, I was sure I'd end up flat on the floor without any chance of getting anywhere.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked.

"I have a lead, but I'm not sure how good it will turn out to be."

"Anything is better than nothing." And I meant it. While Demetra had been as helpful as she could have been, she hadn't told me where I needed to go once I was here.

"That's very true."

"How did you find the lead?" I asked.

"My friend works in the magic quarter. He said they were experimenting on something new and it might be linked to what I'm looking for."

I gasped. "They're using souls to make magic?"

"How else would you do it?"

I shook my head. Magic wasn't something I could do, but I believed it was a part of me. Just like it was the rest of the mer. I'd heard rumours of other creatures like us too, though I'd never seen one. I wasn't about to ask

Erickson about it though. I didn't want to tip any listening ears off that there was more stuff they could harvest from the magical world.

"I've never tried," I admitted. "Magic isn't really a thing for us."

"But mermaids are magic," he countered.

"We're born of magic, but we don't do anything else, really. Some of us have skills with potions though," I added, thinking of Demetra. But she was the only one I knew about. As far as I knew, there wasn't anyone else in our city who could do what she could. Though there might be in some of the other mer cities around the world. If I got my soul back, I was going to travel. I would see everything I could about the world. Even if that meant long swims and lonely nights.

"We're never taught about mer," he mused.

"Not even a mention?" That was interesting. We were taught all about humans from as soon as we could walk. But then, I guessed that made sense. Humans were more of a threat to us than we were to them.

"Just stories. Those from sailors. There is one legend, about a mermaid coming on land to try and marry a Prince."

"We have that one too," I responded. "Every step she took was painful."

"Not unlike yours now." He turned slightly, giving me a cheeky grin but not taking his eyes from where we were going. I liked that. It showed that he at least had some consideration for my unstableness.

"I wouldn't say it hurts to step. It's just not the easiest thing for me to do," I countered. At least, I didn't feel like knives were slicing through the soles of my feet every time I set one down. Which was how bad the legend said it was.

"Good to know. What happens at the end of your version of the story?"

I shrugged. "Much the same as in your version, I guess. She falls in love with the Prince, he with her, they get married and live happily ever after."

Erickson's face fell. "That's not the same as our version," he responded. "Ours is a lot more sinister. She loses her chance to marry the Prince. When

her sisters find out, they barter for a dagger. The mermaid could return to the sea if she stabbed the Prince through the heart with it."

I shuddered. "That's horrible. Did she do it?" If she had, then maybe it would explain why humans seemed to be so against the mer.

"No. She turned into sea foam and disappeared into the air. Some versions say she's taken pity on by some sylphs and became one of them."

"Sylphs?" I'd never heard of them and had no idea what he meant. They certainly weren't part of the stories I'd been told as a child.

"I don't know how to explain them. They're made of air and hang around in the atmosphere."

"And what do they do to her?"

"I'm not sure. In our version of the story, mermaids don't have souls. When they die, they turn to sea foam and just cease to exist."

I laughed lightly as we turned down another street. "I can assure you, that's not what it's like."

"I guessed. You can't have a soul stolen if you didn't have one to begin with."

"Which do you think is the true version of the story?" My words came out barely above a whisper. Part of me didn't want to ask at all. Especially if it would mean he said he thought his version was the right one. If that was true, then how had my people gotten souls to begin with...

"Neither. I think it's nothing more than a story. Each side will tell it the way that puts their own people in the best light. Just like with every other legend like that."

"I suppose..." Though I didn't like to think of the mermaid I'd heard so much about as nothing more than fiction. She'd been an inspiration to so many young mer who wanted adventure. Not so much on land, but out in the open sea.

"You never know, maybe one day they'll be telling our story like they do hers," he said jovially.

I gave him a weak smile. Maybe they would, though that might not be a good thing. So far, I didn't feel like there was anything to learn from my tale. Other than not to go above the water before eighteen. And even then, no one would be able to tell that story until the young mer were above that age anyway. It was a vicious circle that couldn't be changed. At least, not as far as I could tell, anyway.

10

"We're here," Erickson announced as we stopped in front of a large shop window displaying all kinds of magical sights.

"Wow." I tracked a group of lights as they shot up into the space above the display, sending a shower of sparks raining down and echoing the appearance of a sea anemone.

"It's something, isn't it?" He didn't seem anywhere near as awed as I did. But then, he'd lived on land his whole life. This kind of thing was probably more normal for him.

"I don't know how you get anything done with this kind of wonder around you," I admitted. There was truly something mystical about it. I wanted to see more and not tear my eyes away at the same time.

"You get used to it. Most of us don't see magic very often at all. These shops are only for the wealthy. They bring their children here to choose toys."

"Oh." Which raised the question of how he knew someone that worked here, but I let that one sit for the moment. "How do you know the guy?"

"We went to school together." He left me standing at the window and knocked on the door. "You coming?"

I nodded and rushed over to him, regretting it moments later when I nearly fell over again. I shouldn't be trying to do anything so strenuous before my legs were capable of it. Overestimating myself was just going to end in disaster.

Just as I reached the door, a rush of air flew past me. Aaron? Or just some random weather phenomenon that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with wishful thinking on my part. And if it was him, what was he trying to tell me? I wished he'd take his full form more often, it would make communicating a lot easier.

The door swung open to reveal a scrawny redheaded man, with a scruffy beard and clothes that looked like they'd seen better days. While his rough appearance made him seem older. Somehow, I didn't think that was the case. He was probably the person we were here to see, which put him around the same age as Erickson. Though I didn't know what that was. It seemed rude to pry.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"We need to talk to you, Toby," Erickson replied.

Toby grunted. "You and..."

"This is Mari." He leaned in so he was close to the other man's ear. "She's a mermaid."

"A real one?"

"Why would I tell you otherwise if she wasn't?"

"Lots of reasons. What proof have you got?"

"She's the one that saved my life." Their conversation was in hushed tones, but it was enough for me to know what they were saying. Maybe my ears were just stronger than they were supposed to be or something?

"Hmm. Fine, come in. But make sure she doesn't touch anything."

"You okay with that?" Erickson asked me.

I nodded. If I could go into the shop with all the magical things, I'd be one happy mer. It didn't matter if I wasn't able to touch anything. I'd take

that as just part of the price.

"I don't know what you're trying to achieve here, Erik..."

"I'm not trying to achieve anything," he responded. "The mermaid is looking for something precious to her."

"What could possibly be precious to a mermaid?" Toby sneered.

"Her soul," Erickson answered, before leaning in and mumbling something else to him, but I couldn't work out what.

Instead of bothering to try, I let my attention wander around the room, taking in the strange sights the magic shop offered. It wasn't as bright and engaging as the window display had been, but there was still something about the words and the packaging that called to me. Though maybe there was a somewhat sinister reason for that if souls really were the driving force behind it.

"Can you help?" I asked Toby once the two of them had finished their hushed conversation. I had no idea what they'd talked about, but Toby had a broad smile on his face now, and I hoped that meant he was more likely to help us now.

"Not personally, but there's a warehouse not far from here. I've heard rumours that you can buy anything you want from there, including souls."

My heart skipped a beat. "You've heard about the sale of souls?"

He nodded. "Everyone in the magic industry has. Very few people use them, though. They're too expensive and too volatile to work with."

The words sounded more disappointed than anything else, and bile rose in my throat. I wished I didn't have to ask for help from someone like this. He clearly had no respect for life. Not if he was talking about the souls of living beings like that. But I had to take my help where I could find it. Even if I was secretly glad that Erickson had said he knew the other man from school and not because they were friends now. I didn't like the idea of Erickson being wrapped up in the use of souls like that.

"Can you give us directions?" I asked, hoping it would be as simple as that.

"No need. It's the Smith warehouse."

Erickson startled. "Are you sure?"

I gave him a questioning look, wondering what it was that had surprised him so much.

"Absolutely sure."

"What's the Smith warehouse?" I probably should have kept quiet and been glad to have the information I did, but Erikson's reaction was making me warier than I should be.

"It's a toy warehouse," he answered. "I used to work there." Ah. Hence why we wouldn't need directions. That did kind of make sense.

"What an odd place to sell souls from," I mused.

"Or the perfect one," Toby responded. "No one expects anything bad to happen in a place where they deal with things for kids."

"Hmm. I suppose that's true." Though even I knew it was probably more to do with who was selling the souls than the where.

"Do we need to ask for anyone in particular?" Erickson picked up a small box while he was asking and read the label.

"Old John Doe," Toby responded.

"Isn't that the generic name they give to dead people with no name?" Erickson asked. I was glad he did. I'd never have known something like that.

Toby shrugged. Probably because he didn't care what name the man used. "No idea. That's just what I was told to ask for."

"Great, thanks." Erickson flashed him an almost genuine smile. "We'd probably better get going," he announced, walking over to me and putting a hand on my back. It was both welcome and not. I didn't actually know how to feel about our closeness.

"Any time, mate. Just be careful, right? Magic and souls are dangerous. People will go a long way to protect their livelihood."

Erickson nodded. "We'll be careful. Thanks again."

He pushed me towards the door before I could say anything. Was he worried I'd say something wrong? Or was it to do with his friend? I supposed it didn't matter too much. We had a lead, and that was a step in the right direction.

11

THE WAREHOUSE WAS BIGGER than I expected. Not that I'd known what it would be like. It was another thing we didn't really have under the water that they seemed to here. They had a lot more space though. Which seemed ridiculous given the vastness of the oceans. Maybe it was because we couldn't build too far up for fear of ships ripping their hulls on the tops of our buildings. Now I thought about it, the number of ways that we avoided discovery from the humans should have tipped me off that something wasn't quite right. I supposed it was a case of live and learn. Hopefully, I'd be able to look back at my naivety and laugh.

Maybe.

Right now, my hopes weren't that far up. I'd have a long way to go before there was any humour in the situation.

"It's just around this corner," Erickson told me.

I nodded, there wasn't any need to do any more. He probably wasn't expecting a response either. Nerves fluttered in my belly. I had no idea what to expect when we got there, nor how this John man was going to respond when we asked him about souls. Maybe this was all a wild goose chase, and he didn't know anything about any of this. That wasn't an eventuality I liked the sound of.

"Wait here," he instructed when we arrived at what looked like the front doors. It was hard to tell though. They were as large and grey as the rest of the structure.

"Okay."

Shelbie nestled against my legs, surprisingly quiet given how much she'd been enjoying running about before. We watched as Erickson disappeared into the building, hopefully in order to find John and not just to abandon me here.

Shelbie yipped happily and ran out from behind me.

"No..." I started to shout, but trailed off as soon as I saw Aaron's form materialising in front of me. "It's you." I relaxed slightly as his chuckle filled the space.

Somehow, he leaned down and scratched Shelbie's head. I wasn't sure if it was the tickling sensation of his hand passing through her that she liked, or if he'd managed to make himself more solid than before. I prayed for the latter, it would be less weird, that was for sure.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, while kind of being thrilled he was. He'd said he'd help me and it was reassuring that he wasn't just giving up on that.

He stepped forward, crowding me into a doorway and out of sight from any potential passers-by.

"I think the souls are in that warehouse," he whispered.

I nodded. "Yes, Erickson was told there might be a man in there who can help us. His friend said the man was selling souls."

"Selling souls?" he echoed.

I nodded eagerly. "Yes, apparently they're used for magic? But it sounds like the trade is a little frowned upon." At least, that had been my take on what Toby had said. There was a chance I'd misinterpreted it though.

"Magic? That's not what humans use souls for."

"Isn't it? It's what Erickson and Toby said they were for."

"Has it crossed your mind that they might have been being less than truthful?" Aaron demanded, a lot more forcibly than he'd said anything to me before.

I stepped back, flattening myself against the door behind me to put as much distance between us as possible. "Why would they be lying about that?" I stammered. As far as I could see, there was absolutely nothing to gain for them not to tell me the truth. If Erickson hadn't wanted to help me, then he could easily have just let me be when he'd first found me. I wouldn't have even blamed him. I was a lot of work as I got used to having legs.

"I don't know..."

"Then surely it's better to assume people are telling the truth?" I was determined to believe in what I was saying, even if a small part of me had to admit that Erickson insisting on me staying behind was a little odd. How was I supposed to save the mer souls if I wasn't allowed in the building with them? It just didn't make very much sense.

"I just have a bad feeling about it all. Promise me you won't go into the warehouse with him?"

"How else am I supposed to do it? If the souls really are in there..."

"Just trust me, please? Don't go in there with Erickson. I have a bad feeling about it if you do..."

"Okay. I promise. I won't go in with him." Though I'd be sure to find a way in by myself. If the souls were there, I'd find them. They deserved to be freed as quickly as I could manage. Even if Aaron was right and they weren't being used for magic, I couldn't take the risk. It would feel like a failure if I failed to return a soul to someone who still needed it.

"Thank you."

I flashed him a weak smile, hoping it wouldn't look as if I didn't trust him. I wanted to trust in them both, even if they were saying things that seemed to contradict one another. No matter, I'd work out what was really

going on and deal with it. There was too much at stake for there to be any other option.

Footsteps sounded on the street, causing Aaron's eyes to widen. "I have to go." He didn't wait for me to respond before disappearing into thin air. It was a neat trick, but also an annoying one for me.

I sighed dramatically. Why couldn't things be simple?

Shelbie's bark drew my attention to the street where Erickson seemed to be running towards us.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. It was a stupid question really. He was running towards me with a slightly panicked look on his face. Of course, everything wasn't okay.

"We need to come back tomorrow." He grabbed my arm and twisted me around.

I yelped and fell to the floor, not yet having the balance to cope with what he was doing, never mind running alongside him. Shelbie had other ideas though and was already bouncing off down the street, looking back every couple of yards to make sure we were following.

"I'm sorry," he offered as he helped me to my feet. "I forgot you wouldn't be able to run yet."

"That's okay." I dusted myself off. "I guess we'd probably get going?"

He nodded. "I asked for John, and they said he wasn't working. But then I was given a weird look. I think they knew what I was there for..."

"You think there's more than just John involved?" I asked, trying to focus on the conversation and walking quickly at the same time. I didn't know how humans managed it, I already felt like a mess and I'd barely started.

"It looks that way, and now we're going to have to be more careful. They know what I look like, I'd hate for them to discover what you look like too. Then we'd never stand a chance of getting in."

I had no idea how he was talking and running at the same time. It was taking everything I had to keep my legs moving. This was harder than swimming long distance, that was for sure. Though maybe that was just because I wasn't used to it. Instead of responding with words, I just made an odd grunt that I hoped he took for agreement.

Though a part of me recalled what Aaron had said. Suspicion ripped through me. Why were we departing so suddenly? Was it really because he was worried about being recognised, or was it something more than that? Maybe it was more to do with him not wanting me to truly know what was going on. Or perhaps whatever trap he was setting wasn't ready for me yet...

No. I wouldn't think like that. I couldn't. Erickson had been nothing but kind to me from the moment we met, I wasn't going to repay that with suspicion and deceit. He deserved more than that. And I was better than that. I would trust him to do precisely what he said he would. And just hoped I wasn't going to regret it.

12

SITTING on my bed wasn't exactly the way I'd expected this night to end. If things had gone to plan, I'd maybe even have been swimming home, triumphant in having saved the souls and earning back the affection of the other mer. Though I wasn't entirely convinced I'd lost it anyway. It could just be Demetra's memories making me think I had.

I shuddered. Would I get more of her memories once I closed my eyes? I hoped not. Mostly because I didn't want there to be more secrets I needed to know, and partly because I didn't want to see certain situations including dad.

Shelbie pushed her head under my hand, no doubt urging me to scratch behind her ears. I did, staring at the wall absentmindedly and trying to work out what I was going to do about the situation. Technically, I knew where the souls were being hidden, and I knew that I needed to break whatever it was containing them. If I could make my way back to the warehouse, then I should be able to do this without anyone's help.

But that could mean betraying Erickson. He'd done a lot to help me, could I really just abandon him? Then again, Aaron had said I couldn't trust him. Perhaps there was something in that.

A part of me was curious though. I wanted to know what was in the warehouse and no one was telling me. Even if I quizzed Erickson for the details, I doubted he'd tell me. And Aaron had clearly not investigated any further than I had.

Fine. That was it. I would go and investigate the warehouse and nothing more than that. I could then report back to Erickson and seem like I was being helpful and not mistrustful. Of course, the other option would be that I would get caught and turned into magic, but it was better if I didn't consider that too closely.

"Come on girl." I patted my leg the moment I'd jumped to my feet. Shelbie followed, leaping off the bed with grace I definitely envied. "We're going to have to be quiet, though," I warned her.

Her huge eyes met mine, and I could have sworn she nodded. I gave her a weak smile. This wasn't very well thought out and was foolhardy at best, but it was something I had to do.

I pulled the door open, hoping it wasn't going to squeak or otherwise make too much noise. It would be almost impossible to explain what I was doing if I was caught.

The hallway was dark. Probably because Erickson hadn't considered that I might want to run away in the middle of the night. That suited me just fine. If he didn't expect me to go anywhere, then I could be there and back before he knew about it. At least I hoped that would do something to assuage the guilt inside me for disappearing.

Shelbie walked silently behind me, the seriousness of the situation not lost on her. It would be comical if I wasn't so fixated on getting out of here without waking anyone up. Erickson hadn't introduced me to anyone else that lived here, but it wasn't completely unrealistic to think there were other people about. People that might be able to tell I was mer and do something that would make me regret ever trying to find things out by myself.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips as the front door appeared in front of me. I slipped through, closing it with a quiet click behind Shelbie. At least I was good at directions and could slip through the streets easily to retrace the steps we'd taken earlier. The last thing I wanted was to get lost in a strange city with no idea where safety could be. If there was one thing I'd learned from having my soul stolen, it was that nowhere around humans was safe for mer. I didn't know what they might do to me now I didn't have a soul, but it wasn't like I wanted to find out. I imagined it was incredibly painful and not at all dignified.

A rowdy group of people spilt into the street from one of the many doorways and I pressed myself against the wall, hoping they hadn't seen me and want to ask any questions. Shelbie followed, a soft whimper escaping from her. My heart skipped a beat. Was she unhappy? I hadn't meant to put her in this situation.

I crouched down and scratched the spot she seemed to like behind her ears. "You don't have to stay," I told her. "You can go back to the sea if you want to." It would break my heart if she left me, but there was no way I was keeping her here against her will.

She pulled back, my heart skipping a beat as it readied to snap in two. To my surprise, Shelbie didn't run away. Instead, she licked my hand and pushed even closer to me. Instead of breaking, my heart swelled in size. She was happy to stay with me. To go into danger to help save me. At least, that's what I was hoping all of this meant. Without her being able to talk, it was impossible to tell how much of the situation she could actually understand. Maybe I’d be able to tell more when I had more experience reading auras, but even that would be limited. Though it was certainly better than what I’d been able to do before.

With the people gone, it finally felt safe to go back out on the street. As far as I could tell, I was nearly back at the spot where the warehouse was, and the nerves swimming in my stomach convinced me of the same. There

was something close that I needed to be aware of. Shelbie was surprisingly silent. As if she knew it was vital for us to be sneaky and not just burst in.

The warehouse was just as grey and imposing as it had been before. If not more so. I didn't know exactly what it was that made me feel that way about it. Maybe it was just that I was associating it with the souls potentially trapped inside. Or perhaps it was just the size of the structure. It was several times bigger than the largest building I'd seen before coming on land.

"Alright then, where do we go now?" I mused aloud.

A wind whistled past my head. Hopefully, that was Aaron with some idea of how to actually help me get in rather than just the same vague warnings as before. Just in case it wasn't, I continued to look into where I could get into the warehouse. There didn't seem to be any obvious entry points though, which was concerning, to say the least. If I had to go in the front door, then there were a lot more chances for me to get stopped or recognised for what I was.

"There's a fire exit around the corner," Aaron said.

I jumped, not having expected his voice even if I'd hoped he was there.

"Thanks," I mumbled, hoping he hadn't noticed the way I'd responded to him. I didn't want him to think I was scared of him or anything.

"Want help opening it?"

"Please." Especially as I had no idea where to start. "I was just coming for a look around," I reasoned. I didn't want him to think I was doing anything too weird.

"With or without the human?"

"Without," I answered softly, hoping he didn't think too much of it.

Aaron just nodded but said nothing. I was glad of that. I didn't want him to rub it in that he'd warned me to be wary of Erickson. As of right now, I had no idea if there was any reason to be. For all I knew, the insides of the

warehouse could merely prove that he was just as innocent as the rest of us in this. After all, he was as soulless as the two of us.

He led me around the side of the building where there was, in fact, a fire exit. At least he wasn't lying to me about that. My heart sank. I hated what coming on land was doing to me. Before, I'd been so trusting of everyone. So kind-hearted. Now...I didn't even know how to describe myself now. But it wasn't a nice feeling.

"Are you sure about this?" I didn't mean to doubt him. This was more about my own nerves getting the better of me. For some reason, it no longer felt like this was a good idea. It could just be the general sense of foreboding that was coming over me. I didn't want to be that person. The one that demanded something from everyone but never followed through, but right now, that felt like the safest option.

"There's no other way to know for sure," he responded.

"Have you been inside?"

He shook his head. "I could have, but it didn't feel right to."

I gave him a weak smile. I understood that. As much as he clearly wanted to help me, this was my thing to deal with, not his. If he knew what was inside, that would change things. And from what I'd seen of Aaron, it might mean that he tried to convince me not to go inside at all.

"I'm going to dissolve into air and slip through the cracks to open it from the other side," he told me.

"Okay." My voice came out far smaller than I intended it to. Not that there was anything I could do about that. The need to find out what was beyond the door was too strong to ignore.

The moment it creaked open, I had a decision to make. One that could decide my eternal fate.

13

HUGE SHELVES CAST shadows across the warehouse floor, giving the whole place and eeriness I hadn't been prepared for.

"Where is everyone?" I whispered, being careful not to break the peace too much. Shelbie and Aaron were doing the same, both barely making a sound as the three of us walked further into the building, looking around us with each step we took.

"They must not work nights," he answered.

"Is that normal?" My knowledge of this part of human life was woefully slim, and it was starting to show.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I spend most of my time by the sea and not watching the people here."

"Pity."

"In my defence, I didn't know they needed to be watched."

"And would you have? If you'd known about this?" I asked.

His lack of answer told me all I needed to know. Though he probably had no idea I'd worked that out. "No. I don't think I would have. My place is by the sea. Nothing can change that."

"The sea?" What did he mean by that? I knew the sea was where I belonged, but I was mer. It was my home. Where I'd been born. The place

I'd explored throughout my childhood. Yet Aaron seemed to be made of the air. His place also being by the sea didn't make that much sense to me.

He was saved from answering by an odd clattering noise from the left. I spun on my heels, confused and intrigued about what might have caused it. I glanced back at Aaron, noting the confused look on his face revealing that I wasn't the only one who wasn't so sure.

With nothing to lose, I changed direction, creeping through the warehouse and towards the source of the noise. I just hoped it wasn't anything dangerous. Or that we'd get caught investigating.

Aaron didn't move to stop me. Instead, he shuffled along behind, keeping pace with Shelbie who was being abnormally quiet. Maybe it was just because she didn't make as much noise as a seal compared to the dog form she was in now. More likely, it was that she understood the situation and was supporting me through it. At least, that was the way that made the most sense to me. She was far too smart for me. I should be letting her lead this odd expedition.

The doorway in front of us was lit up with a soft glow from the inside. But more importantly, for me at least, was the call from within. Something in that room wanted me to find it. Wanted me to free it. To touch it. To...

"Mari?" Aaron's worried voice cut through my haze, and I twisted around to see what the matter was. "Are you okay?"

"More than okay," I responded dreamily. "This is where I need to be."

Not waiting for him to say anything to stop me, I stepped into the room, bathing in the glow that was stronger here. There was something about the light which filled me with longing. I needed to find out what was making it, no matter what Aaron thought or said.

A song filled my heart. A call from the sea and to it. From hundreds of people and from one. I couldn't work out what I needed to listen to first. The importance of everything was lost.

Shelbie yipped, breaking my focus and pulling my attention to where she was stood in front of me, her tail between her legs and her head cocked to the side as if to ask what was wrong with me.

I shuddered. She was right. What had I been thinking?

"I sense it too," Aaron assured me.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"A siren call." He looked into the distance wistfully, though I wasn't too sure what had gotten his attention.

"Sirens aren't real," I pointed out.

"They are. They're just a certain kind of mer. Every mer has the potential to become one. It just depends on the circumstances."

"How could you know that?" It didn't seem like the kind of information he should have. Especially when he wasn't one of the mer he claimed to know about.

"I've witnessed a lot," he answered vaguely. "It just means that I've learned a lot too."

"Hmm."

"I think it might be the souls though. One or more of them must have the potential to become sirens."

"How would they do that if they were nothing more than souls?" I shouldn't have come on this mission without more information, and I cursed myself for my foolishness now. If it wasn't for the kindness of Erickson and Aaron, I'd never even have made it this far.

"I don't know. I've never seen a soul outside of a body before."

I knew he was telling the truth. I had no idea how, but I did. "So, what do we do?"

"I guess we answer the call." He shrugged, as if it was as simple as that and we weren't risking our very lives being here. Well, my life. I doubted he was in much danger given he could just disappear into thin air with nothing more than a thought.

"I still don't know how to do that," I pointed out.

"Me neither. But that's the beauty of it. We'll find out in just a moment."

I sighed, but stepped forward anyway. Not knowing what was going on all the time was fast becoming frustrating, but I knew Aaron would tell me if he knew anything else about all of this. If only because it would make his life easier.

Listening to what he'd said, I opened up to the part of me that wanted to respond to the siren call. If what he said was true, then the mer souls should call to me and tell me where they were.

I stumbled forward, heeding their call and searching for what I knew to be true. They needed me. The voices called to me. Singing my name and demanding I come to them.

The further into the room I got, the more the glow intensified. That, coupled with the louder singing, told me all I needed to know. This was the right place. A ball hovered in front of me, just bigger than my head. The glow was coming from it, so white that it was almost blue. I reached out to touch it, before thinking better of that. I needed to be more sensible about this. I didn't know what the souls were encased with, for all I knew, it could be dangerous.

"They're beautiful," I whispered.

"They really are," Aaron responded.

"But in pain." Their once alluring song turned to shrieks in my ears. They demanded to be freed. They wanted better than this, and I would be the first one to admit they were right. It was hard to forget that my soul was among them.

Deciding it was worth the risk, I reached forward to touch them once more. This time, my fingers grazed against glass and I sighed with relief. Glass I could deal with. It would just be a case of working out how to separate it from whatever held the ball suspended, and then smashing it.

I reached out with my other hand. There was no time like right now for getting this over with.

"Are you sure that's the best idea?" Aaron asked, though I could tell he wasn't trying to stop me. He just wanted to be sure I was going about it the right way.

Part of me wanted to ask why he cared. It wasn't that he'd taken a liking to me, though I hoped that was also true. Something about this was far more personal to him. Perhaps the humans had stolen souls from his people too.

The moment both of my hands were on the glass, it started to vibrate as the souls bounced from one side to the other, anxious to be free of their prison. I didn't blame them.

Voices sounded in the distance and my eyes widened. Did I have time to take the ball and break the glass before the people arrived, or had my hesitation cost me my chance?

"We need to go," Aaron insisted.

"But..."

"No buts. We need to go now or they'll catch us." His panic was infectious and I pulled my hands away from the ball.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the souls. "I'll be back. I promise." I knew I meant it. There was no other choice as far as I was concerned. They deserved to be free. And not just because I wanted my own soul out of there either. No one should be in that situation. Not even the worst people in the world should be trapped like that.

My heart ripped in two as I turned away, even though I knew I had no choice. It felt like a betrayal to leave them behind.

"We'll be back," Aaron assured me.

"I hope so," I responded.

I didn't look back as I left the room. I couldn't stand the idea of it.

14

"WHAT'S WRONG?" Erickson asked, pulling my attention away from the food in front of me.

"Nothing..."

"I can tell you're lying to me," he replied. "You're not very good at hiding it."

I sighed. That was true. I'd never been a good liar, and was grateful for that most of the time. "I went to the warehouse last night," I admitted softly.

"You did what?" His mouth fell open, a clear indication that what I'd done was wrong. "You know how dangerous that is, right?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have..."

"You're right," he snapped. "You shouldn't have. I said it was too dangerous for a reason."

"I know." I looked down at my plate, ashamed of my recklessness. A soft whimper came from Shelbie at my feet. She knew we were in trouble too. Not that it was her fault. All she'd done was follow me.

"I'm sorry." The bite was gone from his voice. "I didn't mean to snap. It just scared me that you put yourself in so much danger."

"I found them though," I admitted, an edge of excitement in my voice. My recklessness might have been stupid, but at least it had led to actual

information.

"The souls?"

I nodded eagerly. "They're keeping them there, in a glass ball. I almost managed to free them too."

Something odd flitted across his face, but was gone before I could work out what it was. "What stopped you?"

"There were people coming." I stayed quiet about Aaron's involvement, still unsure why I was doing that, but feeling as if it was right to keep it quiet.

"That's annoying."

"I know. But at least now we know where they are. Plus, we can look for your soul while we're there again. Just in case they're keeping them in a different place," I said. I wasn't sure how I knew that it was only mer souls I'd found, but I did.

"That's true. Did you see anything else that might help?"

"There's a fire exit." Guilt filled me. Was telling him that betraying Aaron? I didn't think so. Not when Erickson was also helping me to get the souls and free them from their cage.

Erickson nodded. "That's good. Do you think we can get in there tonight?" he asked.

I frowned and cocked my head to the side. "Why not now?" The sooner we went, the sooner we could free everyone.

"I have to go to work. I'm sorry."

"Oh." It hadn't crossed my mind that he might have to go to work. While we did all have responsibilities in the underwater city, no one really had jobs that they got paid for. The economy worked very differently on land, that was for sure.

"I'll be back before you know it. Will you be okay?"

"Of course," I responded. Maybe I should have waited until today to sneak into the warehouse rather than going last night. Though it might have

been more reckless. There would be more people around now. Workers who hadn't been there last night.

"There's a library down the corridor, if that interests you."

I nodded.

"Wait, you can read, can't you?"

A small laugh escaped me. "Yes, I can read." We even had books underwater, though they were very different from the ones I'd seen so far in shops here. They wouldn't survive a moment in the water.

"Oh good. I was worried for a second..."

"Don't worry about me. I'll find something to occupy myself with. Is there anything I can look up or practice for tonight?" The last thing I wanted was to come so close to the souls again and not be able to do anything about it, I would be devastated. I'd come here for a reason, and there wasn't a thing in the world that would stop me from doing just that.

"I don't think so. But there might be a book about what souls can be used for in there?" He didn't seem too sure about that, but I'd take it either way. It wasn't like that was necessarily helpful. It could give us some insights into what was happening in the warehouse though. Maybe it could even stop the same thing from happening again in the future.

"I'll do that." I flashed him a smile. "It's at the end of the corridor, right?" I'd been wondering what the door led to. At least this answered one of the many questions that had been plaguing me.

"Yes. If anyone asks..."

"I'm your sister. Yes." He'd told me that the moment I'd arrived at the lodgings. I wasn't too sure why, but humans were kind of weird, I was just coming to accept that. After I freed the souls, I planned to head back to the sea anyway, so it wasn't as if I needed to understand human culture any more than I did already.

"Sorry, I know it must be frustrating to have to lie all the time..."

I shrugged. "I'm getting used to it."

"Hopefully, you won't have too much more after tonight."

"I hope not."

We lapsed into an almost awkward silence. I took a sip from my tea, something I'd found I definitely liked about life on land. The heat, the taste, even the smell, made me feel warm inside. It was a shame I couldn't take it back to the city with me.

He coughed uncomfortably. "I need to go."

"Have a good day." I flashed him another smile, trying not to put my feelings across within it.

"You too." He seemed as if he was about to lean in and do something like kiss me. But that couldn't be possible. It was just my mind seeing too much into the situation.

He left the room without saying anything else, and I let out a sigh. I hadn't realised how much the odd tension in the air was bothering me.

Finishing up my breakfast, I made a plan in my head for the library. It wouldn't do any good if I just went in there with no clue of what to look for. Of course, that was going to be the case regardless. I'd never looked into anything about souls before.

"Alright then, let's get this over with," I said to Shelbie as I pushed my chair back.

She dashed out from under the table and scampered around my feet. At least someone was excited to be able to spend some time with me.

"I know. We might not find anything," I told her. "But we have to at least try."

I took her small yipping sound as confirmation. Remembering what Aaron had taught me, I relaxed my sight and looked at her aura. She appeared happy, but that was the only thing I could see. So much for being able to tell what she was thinking. That had probably just been wishful thinking on my part.

15

"MARI?" The voice seemed harried. Almost worried even. Like I was doing something I wasn't supposed to have, and yet...

"Mari." It was a familiar voice. I knew the person behind it. Why were they disturbing me? Couldn't they see that I was sleeping? I didn't want to be awake.

Shelbie nudged at my leg, and I groaned. Now she wanted me awake? What kind of torture was this? I just wanted to rest. To close my eyes and not worry about the rest of the world for ten more minutes...

"Mari."

My eyes blinked open. This time, the voice had been too frantic for me to ignore.

"What?" I snapped.

"You fell asleep," Aaron said, a sincere look on his face.

"I'm aware." It had been too difficult to stave off the sleep when the library had been as cosy as it was. A fire burned, and the chair was beautifully padded.

"Are you okay?"

"I was until I was woken up," I replied pointedly.

"The book not interesting?" He pointed to the spread pages in front of me.

"The opposite. I was just sitting back and thinking about what I'd read," I answered honestly.

"And?"

"Nothing we can use, I don't think. But apparently, the souls are probably being used as a power source for the city."

"That doesn't sound good..."

"It's actually better than it could be." Much to my relief. "Using souls as a power source doesn't actually drain them. It says that someone needs to keep adding new souls, but every soul that's ever been added is still in the ball."

"Oh." Excitement flitted through his eyes. "But what happens to the souls of the mer who have already passed on?" he asked.

"I don't know. This is more talking about the mechanics of what the humans are doing, rather than what it means for the souls. They really don't seem to care on that front."

"That's sad."

"It's more than that," I observed. "It's barbaric. It's like they think it doesn't matter just because we're not human."

He leaned in, as if to pat my shoulder, before remembering his touch wouldn't feel like anything. "I'm sorry..."

"You don't need to be," I reminded him. "It isn't you stealing souls and using them as fuel. This is on the humans themselves." Disgust filled me. What was wrong with them that they were this careless with other creatures?

"I don't think all of them are bad."

"I'm sure they're not." Erickson's face flashed through my mind as I said the words. He was doing his best to help me find the souls, and even if it

was for the selfish reason of wanting to find his own in the process, he was still doing the right thing. "They're even taking souls from other humans."

"They're what?" Aaron seemed genuinely confused, but that made sense to me.

"I know, nothing is sacred to them..."

"No, it's not that. Just that human souls aren't the same as ou...mer souls. They don't have the same magic to them."

"They don't?" My brows furrowed together and I turned back to my book, hoping that would have some answers for me.

"No. Mer souls are made of magic. Human souls are too, but it's not the same. I'm pretty sure your book will tell you..."

"That human souls can't be used as an energy source." My heart sunk as I read the words aloud. "Could there be a chance the book is lying to me?" I asked.

"Potentially. To put people off stealing others' souls, maybe? But what makes you think they're doing it to themselves too?"

I glanced away, unable to look at him as I mumbled the words. "I asked Erickson after I saw he didn't have an aura."

"He doesn't have one?"

I shook my head, still not looking at him.

"That's unusual."

"In a good or a bad way?" Nerves fluttered in my stomach. I trusted Erickson and didn't really want to hear anything negative about it. But I owed it to Aaron to at least hear him out. So far, everything the non-corporal man had told me was the truth. And he'd taught me to read auras in the first place.

"I guess that depends. It could be bad for him that he has no soul, but good for us because he's helping us. Or it could be bad for us because he's hiding his aura and we can't tell anything about him."

"Is that possible?" I didn't like the idea of someone purposefully hiding their aura. Why would they want to pretend they didn't have a soul if they did? It just didn't make any sense to me.

"Possible, but difficult."

My shoulders sagged. Difficult would mean that someone who was a similar age to me, probably wouldn't be able to do it. At least, that was what I was going to keep telling myself.

"I'm going to do some more reading." I gestured needlessly to my book.

Aaron nodded. "Do you mind if I take a look around?"

"Be my guest." It was no skin off my nose if he wanted to poke around the little library. Maybe I should have been confused by the fact this place even existed. It was completely at odds with the rest of Erickson's home. Comfortable, decadent, and with the open fire. But it was so nice in here that I just didn't want to question it. Plus, my knowledge of human living was so limited that it didn't mean anything if I didn't understand something. Perhaps all human homes were like this. Utilitarian apart from the library. I could understand that in a way. Books were the gateway to so much more than just the words on the page. They should be treasured like this, of that, I had no doubt.

Aaron wandered off among the shelves. I almost asked what he was looking for, but thought better of it. I'd effectively been the one who dismissed him, it wasn't fair for me to then bring him back into a conversation.

I fell into the words on the page, both intrigued and repulsed by what I was reading. It seemed like the humans had devised several ways to use mer souls. And were currently researching ways to use other souls they'd managed to harvest. The only thing the book didn't seem to cover was how they managed to do it. Or why they hadn't found a decent power source that didn't involve stealing from the mer.

"Mari?" he called.

"Hmm?"

"I think you need to come see this." He almost sounded scared. But that couldn't be right. There was nothing but books in here, I'd checked when I first arrived.

I rose to my feet, already apprehensive about whatever it was he might have found to make him sound so unsure of himself. I walked through the shelves, none of them much taller than I was, adding to my sense of security in the matter. Nothing lurked behind the shelves. Or under the floor, or on the roof. It was silly to think he might have found anything like that. Besides, he was literally made out of thin air. Nothing could hurt him if he didn't want it to.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I reached him. He was shaking, which only made him shimmer more than usual.

"You need to see this."

I'd already gathered as much from when he'd asked me to come look, but I didn't say anything. It didn't feel appropriate given how shaken he seemed. Instead, I turned to the shelf he was pointing at.

"Oh no." His horror suddenly made sense. The shelf in front of us was filled with books about mer. More than that, it was filled with books about taking mer souls and how to use them for various things. Even through the disgust and shock, part of me was confused why the book I'd been reading hadn't been in this section too.

I pulled out the first book, hating the feel of the cracked maroon covering over it. The golden mermaid embossed in the cover didn't make things any better either. Instead, it just made me feel kind of dirty. My people were being used for...nothing. From everything I'd seen while on land, it seemed like humans were intelligent and resourceful. It was just laziness that had them doing this.

"You don't have to read..."

"I do," I told him, flipping through the pages, the sick feeling only intensifying with each page I scanned. At least the diagrams were simplistic. I wouldn't have been able to deal with it if there'd been more visual information on the way to hurt mer.

"Mari..."

"Mer aren't hurt when their soul is taken from them. In fact, it is a mercy to do so. They are not creatures who use their souls as with them, they lure sailors to their deaths," I read, my voice cracking the further I got into it. "Their souls are taken as payment for lives lost at sea."

"That's some warped logic," Aaron observed.

I made a non-committal noise, already horrified by the next part the book talked about. "The souls of mermaids more than eighteen years old are useless. They shouldn't be harvested as they don't contain the most potent amount of magic," I read. "So, it's nothing to do with a curse. It's just that merchildren are more useful to them." I snapped the book shut and shoved it back on the shelf as tears threatened in my eyes.

"I'm sorry," Aaron whispered.

"It's not your fault. Unless you're the ghost of a human."

"I'm not a human ghost," he responded quickly.

"Then it's not your fault." I blinked a couple of times, trying to force the tears back. "Do you mind leaving me alone for a bit? I need to think about this." And read some more of the book. I didn't really want to, but I knew that I should. The more I knew, the better equipped I'd be to deal with the evening ahead. While I'd seen the inside of the warehouse, I knew I wasn't adequately prepared for what would happen there. I couldn't be. No matter who we encountered, I was freeing those souls tonight.

"Of course. I'm sorry they're doing this." He touched my arm with his hand, though neither of us felt anything. In that moment, I regretted the fact he couldn't touch me.

"Thanks. We're going back to the warehouse tonight. Will you come?" My voice shook once again. I wanted him with us, though I worried he wouldn't come.

"I'll be there. Even if you can't see me."

"Thank you." I flashed him a weak smile, unable to do any more than that.

I didn't wait for him to respond. Not when there was nothing more to say. Instead, I grabbed the book and left the library, Shelbie following on my heels. I ignored the urge to look back, uncertain where it had even come from. I appreciated everything Aaron was doing to help me, but I couldn't let myself get distracted by someone I barely knew. Especially a man who wasn't even corporal. That was an easy way to end up with my heart broken.

16

EVERY STEP REVERBERATED THROUGH ME. Though at least it wasn't making me want to fall over still. There must have been something in the potion Demetra had given me to make walking quicker to learn than for humans themselves, because I finally seemed to be getting it. One foot in front of the other. No other focus than that.

My head swam with thoughts of what I'd read earlier. A part of me wanted to bring up what I'd learned with Erickson, but another part was screaming for me not to. Even if I didn't understand where the latter feeling was coming from, I knew I should listen to it. At least for the next couple of hours while we dealt with the souls in the warehouse. I needed his help there and didn't want to risk it by revealing what his people had been doing to mine.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I nodded. Shelbie pressed herself against my leg, probably because she sensed how uneasy I was about all of this.

"I need you to wait while I go check the front door," Erickson told me.

"Again?" I blurted. Last time he'd come running back with a panicked look on his face.

"Yes. It's night now." He gestured to the sky, as if I needed confirmation from the moon that he was telling the truth. Maybe I did. "I just need to check that the same security as before has been put in place."

"Alright." I sat myself down on the step of what I presumed was someone's house. Hopefully, whoever it belonged to wouldn't come out and shoo me away.

"I'll be back in a moment." He rested a hand on my shoulder and I had to suppress the urge to shrug it off.

I didn't know where my aversion was suddenly coming from, but I needed to get it under control, or else I was going to end up going a little bit crazy.

He left me alone in the dark, off to do whatever checks he'd told me he needed to do. I rolled my eyes. But then, maybe if Aaron and I had done the checks the previous night, we would have been able to save the souls and not still be trying to work out how to do that.

"Why are things on land so complicated?" I asked Shelbie, scratching her head.

She whined and pushed further into me. I appreciated it. Her comfort was familiar. Almost a reminder of home, even if we both had noticeably different bodies.

"Do you like it here?" I asked, making sure to look at her aura for the answer. It turned a muddy brown, which seemed like a good colour for confusion. "Yes, I feel that way too." I sighed. Land was definitely something I was unsure about. With all the danger here, I wasn't in any rush to visit again. But then there was Erickson. He'd helped and supported me when he didn't have to. It might be nice to spend some more time with him.

And with Aaron. But then, he might be able to visit me while I was still in the sea and he was in the air. Could he even come under the water with me? He didn't have a real body, maybe that meant he didn't need to breathe and wouldn't risk drowning if he came to my city...

"Are you meaning to call me?" Aaron said, his wispy form leaning against the doorframe next to me.

"Call you? I didn't say anything."

"No, but you're thinking about me." A boyish grin took over his pale face.

"How could you possibly know that? I didn't..."

"It's written all over your aura."

"I thought I didn't have one." That was what he'd told me anyway. I tried the trick on him but saw nothing more than the usual deadness around him.

He sighed and perched on the step beside me. "It's not as straightforward as that. You can't see much difference in auras yet, but once you've been doing this a while, you pick up a couple of other things, even if the person is soulless."

"What's a while?"

He shrugged. "I don't really know. I've been in this state for so long, it's hard to remember the exact length of time."

"Wait, you weren't born like this?"

He shifted uncomfortably, the movement accentuated by the way his body was made up. "No. This wasn't how I was born. None of my kind were born."

"There's more of you?" My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought to ask him more of this before. But at least it was distracting me from Erickson's absence. It felt like he'd been checking out the front door for a long time. Part of me wanted to go find him, but I knew that wasn't the best choice.

"Yes. There are more people like me," he admitted.

"Do they talk to other people? Like you are to me?"

He shook his head. "Most of them live above the sea and won't leave it." Undefined emotions swam in his voice, but I didn't prod. Something deep

within me knew I needed to be careful so he didn't end up more hurt.

"Why did you leave the sea?" I asked, steering away from the subject of the other people like him. It was clearly a sore subject.

"To help you. What you're trying to do could help so many people..."

"It's purely selfish," I joked. "I want my own soul back..."

"We both know that isn't true."

Our eyes met, conveying all the words that were left unspoken between us. The urge to touch him returned, but I knew that wasn't possible. It was just my mind projecting on to him. I couldn't let it control my actions in any way. That wasn't fair to either of us.

"Did your book say anything about what would happen to the souls of the mer whose bodies already died?" he asked suddenly.

"I'm sorry, it didn't." I grimaced. It had been bothering me too. There were far more souls in the ball than there were mer in my city, which meant that some of them had already passed on. Would their souls just cease to exist? Or would they get some peace? I hoped for the latter but feared the former was more likely. "I hope it just lets them rest. They deserve peace after what they've been through."

"Even if they cease to exist, I'm sure all of them are grateful for you even trying. Please remember that."

I gave him a weak smile. "I'll try." But the guilt would no doubt eat away at me. Even if there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Aaron opened his mouth to say more, but hurried footsteps stopped him. "I'm sorry," he mouthed as he faded away into thin air.

That was annoying. But I could understand why he'd done it. I wasn't ready for Erickson to know about Aaron's existence either. I didn't know why, but the deeper into this situation I got, the more I was learning to trust my gut instinct. There'd be a reason I felt this way, even if I didn't know what it was yet.

"We're good to go in," Erickson announced the moment he arrived at my stoop.

Shelbie shrunk back, hiding behind me. That was odd. I'd never noticed her reacting to the human-like that before. She'd not been overly friendly with him, but that didn't translate into dislike or fear. Not like this.

Something must have changed.

"Alright then. I'll show you the door."

17

THE DIMNESS of the warehouse was precisely the same as the previous evening. I jumped as the fire door slammed back into its frame behind us. We were already too loud, but Erickson didn't seem to care at all. Perhaps humans were just a little bit reckless. That fit with just about everything I'd learned about them so far.

"I'm going to go this way. You go that way?" Erickson pointed away from the room with the souls in it.

"That's not where..."

"I know. But we need to do the perimeter first. Otherwise, we might end up getting caught."

My eyes widened. How had I not thought about that? Especially when we'd been so close to being caught the night before. "Got it. What am I looking for?"

"Any evidence that there are people moving around. Guard centres, the like. Anything that looks dangerous to us."

"Okay." My voice shook. I shouldn't have started this mission. It had been foolhardy to put myself in such danger when so many more people would have been better suited to this than I was. I'd only just turned

eighteen. I had no life experience, and it was showing. I hadn't even realised I needed to check I wouldn't get caught before doing something dangerous.

He nodded and went off in his own direction. No doubt to check on the front door again. I just about managed not to roll my eyes as I set off in the direction he'd sent me in. Maybe I was the one being foolish here. Perhaps I shouldn't be trusting him.

"Don't start second-guessing yourself now, Mari," I muttered to myself.

Cold air brushed against my back, and I managed to relax slightly. Aaron was here. That was reassuring, even if he wasn't visible to my naked eye. Something about him elicited a sensation of safety deep within. In this situation, it was incredibly welcome. I wanted it more than I would admit.

If anything, the warehouse seemed to be getting darker the further into it I went. "This is stupid," I muttered. "We should be going straight for the souls and worrying about how to get away with it after," I said to Shelbie. Well, and to Aaron, if he was listening. I hoped he was.

Maybe I'd have felt differently if we'd actually had a plan. But as far as I could tell, we were all just making it up as we went along.

The cold air rushed past me again. Taking it as agreement, I changed my heading. If Erickson didn't want to go straight for the souls, then that was his problem. I didn't have time to waste, nor did the people whose souls were trapped. It was my duty to make sure they were freed, even at the expense of a human's trust.

Shelbie followed behind me, demure in her stride. This wasn't like her at all, and I took that as a sign that I needed to be careful. Her instincts weren't to be messed with. Other than her initial instinct to attach herself to me. I was sure somewhere within, she was questioning that one.

The sirens in the soul ball called out to me again, their voices hooking into my heart and pulling me towards the room. There was no way I could ignore them now my ears were opened to them. Even if I'd wanted to. I stepped into the room, the soft blue glow from the soul ball lighting up my

face. It seemed like the place was empty. I should make the most of it. There was no doubt in my mind that others would come into the room soon. That was what had happened when Aaron and I had come here the first time. I should learn from that and not hesitate this time.

I stepped up to the ball, studying it intently to try and work out how to free it. The light and the siren calls were almost too much for me to take, but I knew I needed to. This was important, and not just for me. The glass ball appeared to be hovering above something created by air, but there was nowhere I could see to turn it on and off.

"Aaron?" I asked, hoping he was listening even if he didn't take on his form. "Can you get between the ball and the air?"

Coldness brushed against my back once more. At least I'd been interpreting the touches correctly. That was something at least.

I placed my hands on either side of the ball, knowing that if Aaron managed to cut off the air holding it up, then I'd need to grab it. If I dropped it, all that would happen was that the air would buoy it up once more, defeating the point of the whole plan.

The moment Aaron did what I wanted him to, I could tell. The glass ball rested heavily in my hands, and I quickly pulled it towards me, hugging it to my chest even as I stumbled backwards from the weight. I began to wobble on my feet. I wasn't sure why, but I hadn't expected the thing to be as heavy as it was. Perhaps that was just due to the weight of the glass. Or maybe it was the souls themselves. I didn't feel any lighter without mine, but my body had changed with the addition of my legs anyway, so it would be hard to tell.

Steadying myself, I stared into the ball, unsure what to do now. The souls didn't have any fixed form. Instead, they swirled around, looking like the sea and everything that was beautiful about it. To me, it made complete sense that they looked that way. These were souls of mer and each would be calling out for the salt water of the oceans.

"Don't worry, I'm going to send you home. I just need to work out how to free you," I whispered to the ball.

"Don't do it!" Erickson cried as he ran into the room.

"What?" I looked up at him, confusion creasing my brow.

"Don't you dare smash that ball," he warned.

"It's what we came here to do?" I returned. It didn't make any sense to then backtrack and not go through with it.

He held out his hand, something blue glowing there. Something a lot like...

I gasped. He had a soul. But why? And whose?

"If you smash that ball, then I'll destroy your soul," he threatened.

A lead weight dropped in my stomach. Had I just heard him right? How long had he had my soul? Had he just found it without telling me? Or was this something more sinister than that? Had he had it all along? Unbidden thoughts swam through my head, refusing to come into any sense of order. The biggest question was the loudest though...what did I do now?

18

ERICKSON STEPPED TOWARD ME, and it took everything I had not to shrink back. I couldn't let him know how much his betrayal stung. It wasn't worth the satisfaction I somehow knew he'd feel.

"How long have you had that?" My voice sounded a lot stronger than I'd expected. I'd have thought my nerves and disgust would have shone through a little bit more. This was for the better though. I didn't want him to know how much he'd gotten to me.

"The entire time." He shrugged and brought himself within touching distance. "How do you think you lost your soul in the first place?"

I sucked in a breath. All of Aaron's mistrust, all of the unease Shelbie was feeling, every moment of doubt I'd had myself. It all made sense.

"But why?"

"We need mer souls to power the city. It's nothing personal." He smirked. "It's not like you need it. You're still walking and talking without it."

"I don't need it for now," I snapped. "I need it for when the final judgement comes."

"You don't seriously believe in that, do you?" He laughed. Actually laughed. As if my entire people's misfortune was something to be found

funny. If he thought I was going to be okay with this, then he had another thing coming. I wasn't at all interested in debating philosophy.

"It doesn't matter what I believe. That soul belongs to me. No one else. Just me."

"And the ones in your hand?"

"They belong to the people they were stolen from," I threw back. "They deserve to be reunited with those bodies."

"And what would they do with them?" He smirked.

I ignored his question. Answering it would just end up with the two of us going around in circles over what was right and what wasn't. "You still haven't told me why."

"I told you, to power the city."

"That's not what I want to know. Why bother helping me if you already had what you needed from me?"

"Curiosity." His expression grew more serious, convincing me that he was telling the truth. Though that wasn't all that reassuring in the circumstances. "I've never seen a mermaid on land before. I hadn't even realised you could do that."

"It's not normal," I pointed out as I shifted the glass ball to make it more comfortable. I should just smash it now. The souls would escape, and I would have done what I came here to do. Even if I had to lose my soul forever in the process, it would be worth it.

"Exactly. And here was the perfect chance for me to study a mermaid. I'm a scientist first and foremost, even if I have to do most of the fieldwork of collecting souls. I need to learn."

I shuddered, the glass ball slipping through my fingers a little accidentally.

Erickson lurched forward, as if to try and catch it. He really was worried about what would happen if the souls got free. And it really did seem like it would be as easy as smashing the damn thing.

"If you give me the souls, I'll return yours to you." There was a real note of concern in his voice. He definitely feared losing the ball and what that might mean for him. Maybe he'd get punished for it. That was all I could really hope for. I didn't want to have to hurt anyone.

"I'm sorry. That deal isn't good enough."

I watched as my words sunk in. Even though I meant them, and was happy to sacrifice my soul for something so important, a part of me still wanted to hold back. I knew what I was giving up. And it was hard.

"Mari..." Aaron stood behind Erickson, now almost corporal. He gave me a longing look, as if wishing that I didn't have to make this choice.

Erickson spun around. "Who are you?"

"Someone whose soul was stolen," Aaron replied sharply.

"I don't recognise you." Erickson sounded put out, like he thought he should.

"Do you remember the faces of everyone you steal from?" I spat out. "I hope they haunt your dreams."

He peered around at me quickly, before turning his attention back to Aaron.

"My soul was stolen long before you were born."

Wait. What did that mean? Was Aaron mer?

"This is what happens to mer whose souls have been stolen. It's torture, being stuck between the land of the living and the land of the dead." Aaron stepped forward, cowing Erickson who nearly crashed into me.

I sidestepped.

"Rest in peace, Aaron," I whispered, our eyes locking as I threw the ball of souls away from me. I might not have known him for very long, but the connection to him now made so much sense. And if I could finally offer him closure by forfeiting my own soul, then so be it. He deserved that. All he'd done was help me.

"NO!" Erickson cried, reaching out for the glass ball even as it smashed, spilling souls all over the floor.

They zipped around the room, making the place smell comfortingly of salt water. I closed my eyes and breathed it in. If I was going to be cursed for life, then I would take every moment given to me and enjoy it for what it was.

"How dare you," Erickson's voice shook with rage. "Do you know what you've done?"

"Freed people who should never have been captive." My eyes snapped open, and I stared him down. Did he really think I was going to be easily scared when I'd just made my peace with losing my soul for all eternity? Right now, I wasn't someone to be messed with.

"I will destroy you..." He rushed forward even as he left his threat hanging.

I stood still. He could do whatever he wanted to me at this point. I didn't even care. I'd done what I came here for. If that meant I would lose my life, then at least I'd done what I'd vowed I would. Maybe my people would never hear about what I did. But that was okay too. I hadn't done any of this for fame. It was the right thing to do, and I could rest easy knowing I'd done it. Soul or no soul. Just because I had nothing to face the final judgement with, didn't mean I shouldn't live a good life. Not that I knew what the final judgement even was. It was only ever spoken about in vague terms I didn't understand.

The hand without my soul ball in reached out like a claw. I swallowed, not wanting to admit to being scared, even if I was. I wished Aaron was still here, even though I knew freeing his soul would no doubt have released him too. If only I'd had time to say goodbye properly. A part of me missed him already.

Erickson's hand was about to clasp around my neck when he fell right in front of me. I watched as the tiny ball containing my soul bounced away

from him.

"You little..." He shook his fist, but not at me.

Frowning, I followed his gaze to find a smug looking Shelbie sat cleaning her paws. I snorted. She was a good friend.

"Thank you," I whispered to her, even if I wasn't too sure what I was thanking her for.

"We're not quite done yet," Aaron's voice added, a little more real sounding than it had been before.

I whipped my head around to find a very solid looking man stood a couple of metres away, a blue soul filled ball in front of him.

"This way, we can both have our souls." He stamped down on it, sending the tendrils of blue soul out into the room once more.

This time, it was different. The smell of the sea was different, but there was a faint call in the background too. Something talking to me specifically and not to any of the others here.

The soul rushed towards me and I braced myself. Not knowing what to expect. When it had been removed, there'd been nothing but pain. Maybe that would be the case again. Aaron himself had recovered quickly from being reunited with his soul. More than that, Aaron was alive again. I'd have to ask him about that once the soul had reunited with me and I wasn't so focused on that.

Everything flashed blue as the tendrils reached me. I closed my eyes, trying to stop the light from hurting them, but it didn't work. It had been foolish of me to even try. This was a soul, it wasn't visible like other things were.

My senses faded as the two parts of me recombined. I hoped Shelbie and Aaron were taking care of Erickson and the rest of the warehouse, because I wasn't in the least bit aware of what was going on around me.

19

ONCE THE BLUE LIGHT FADED, everything was different and yet the same. One look around told me I was still in the warehouse. Everyone was still where I'd left them too, which probably meant what had felt like an age to me was nothing more than a couple of minutes at the most.

A second look told me that the warehouse was pretty much destroyed. The big ball of souls must have ripped it apart when they'd escaped. It was almost a relief. This much destruction would take them a good while to rebuild. And if they were busy doing that...

"Mari, we need to go," Aaron insisted, a worried note in his voice.

I nodded my agreement. It was better that we got out of here before Erickson got any backup. It surprised me that there wasn't any here already. Maybe he hadn't brought any with him to begin with.

I tried to take a step forward, but failed, overbalancing and falling to the floor. Moving my legs back and forth, I tried to work out how to get them moving but came up with nothing. It was almost like...

"Aaron..." My voice quivered in combined concern and pain as my legs knitted back together into a tail. There was no denying that was what was happening. I could sense it with every fibre of my being.

"Oh."

"Yes, oh." Fear filled me completely. If I couldn't walk, then I couldn't get out of here and getting my soul back might have all been for nothing.

He scooped me up into his arms, the heat of his skin where it hit mine entirely welcome. Being touched by him felt as good as I'd expected it to. Not that I should be surprised. There must have been a reason I was yearning for his touch before. If he was really mer, then that could explain why. Though he didn't seem to be affected by the same tail problem that I was. I shouldn't think on that too much in case I end up freaking myself out. Or in case I accidentally made my tail problem catch. The last thing we needed was the two of us stuck on land with people after us for destroying their economy.

Oops. When I thought about it like that, they had every right to be angry with us. We really had messed things up for them.

Aaron's legs pumped beneath us as he ran away from the warehouse and towards the water, Shelbie snapping at his heels the entire time. None of us made a noise save for our breathing, we were too focused on the task at hand. I didn't even know if the other two would be able to just come back into the water with me. Or why recombining with my soul had made it so my mer features took hold again. I supposed that in some ways, it didn't matter too much. My intention had always been to return home, and doing that I was.

The city seemed much bigger than when we'd walked across it. Maybe because I kept glancing over Aaron's shoulder to check Erickson wasn't chasing us to the water's edge. Even though I was reassuring myself constantly, I was still confused about why he wasn't doing just that. He'd not been particularly incapacitated. Just winded. He should be able to chase after us if he wanted to.

I didn't relax until the sea was in front of us.

"I'm just going to throw you in," Aaron told me.

I nodded. There were probably some more elegant ways, but I didn't care about them. "Are you coming?"

"When I figure out how," he responded.

I reached out and touched his face, trailing a finger down his cheek. "Please hurry."

"I will," he promised, even as he threw me towards the water.

I crashed through the calm water of the surface and stretched out, pulling the clothing from my body and letting the salty sting of the sea refresh me. I hadn't realised how many aches and pains I'd had until that moment the sea stole them away. I swished my tail from side to side, loving the feel of the water against it. Something was reassuring about it. If I'd had any doubts that the water was my home, they all left me now.

A familiar bark sounded above the surface, though it was distorted slightly by the water. Even so, I knew it was Shelbie. And she wouldn't be barking without a good reason.

I swam upwards without even thinking about it, breaking the surface and powering myself back towards the shore.

"NO!" I shouted as Erickson lurched towards Aaron, his arm raised and pointing what looked like a knife.

"You must pay..."

"He already paid," I shouted, trying to gain the human's attention. "He had his soul taken by you..."

"And then you took it back," Erickson sneered. "And he's an easier target than you. From what I've seen, it'll hurt you just as much when I carve out his heart."

Tears began to stream down my face. I had to admit that it was much easier to hide them when I was underwater. Here, everyone could see that I was crying.

Shelbie ran around Erickson's ankles, clearly trying to trip him up again.

"I'm not falling for that again," he growled, kicking out at her.

A scream escaped my lips as she tumbled from the rocks and fell into the sea. With a quick glance to check Aaron was still okay, I dived under the water and towards where my best friend had fallen. If anything had happened to her, I'd never be able to forgive myself. She was only trying to protect Aaron and me. She didn't deserve to be injured just for that.

I scooped her into my arms from where she was floating in the water and swam back to the surface. It seemed that the sea was all we needed to change back into our natural forms though. I could already feel her fur falling away and her feet turning into fins. Hopefully whatever magic was turning her back into a seal from a dog was also helping fix anything that Erickson had hurt inside her.

We broke the surface, and she nudged her nose against my arm. I sighed with relief, she was alive. That was something at the very least. I flicked my tail from side to side, more conscious of the movement than I usually was. Probably because I hadn't used my tail in a while. That was certainly an unexpected consequence of being on land for so long. I wasn't sure I liked it. Another reason not to visit much. As if I needed any more now I didn't need to worry about the human who'd helped me. Not when he'd been doing it for no reason other than his own curiosity.

Shouting drew my attention away from Shelbie and back towards the two men. They were grappling one another, growing closer to the sea with every moment. I didn't know how I felt about that. There was a chance it had been too long since Aaron had a tail and it wouldn't reappear fast enough to save him if they fell. Though it should still give him a distinct advantage, particularly if Erickson had been telling the truth about his feelings about the sea. Somehow, I doubted it. He'd clearly intended to trap a mer soul that day. It had all been an act. More fool me for believing it.

The shouting intensified, and I jumped as one of their feet slipped. It was impossible to tell which body part belonged to which of them when

they were grappling like this. It just all seemed to be a case of limbs flying everywhere.

They were going to fall. I knew it even before they did. And yet there was nothing I could do about it. Shelbie could clearly sense it too, as she swam out of my arms. At least that meant she wasn't injured badly. If she could swim and support herself, that was all I needed to know.

I felt the splash before I saw it as the two men hit the water. Not waiting to see if either of them surfaced on their own, I dived down into the water. Bubbles filled my vision from their frantic movements and panic began to fill me. What if Aaron was hurt? Or worse, what if his mer instincts hadn't kicked in and he drowned? I didn't want that.

I swam further down, hoping to work out what was going on before I swam into them by accident. Thankfully, they seemed to have fallen apart when they'd hit the sea.

A bright red tail flicked passed me, and I relaxed slightly. That must be Aaron. I didn't know how I knew his tail would be red, but it just felt right for him. He began to float next to me, a serene expression on his face.

"It's good to be underwater again?" I asked him.

He nodded. "I'd forgotten just how much I missed it."

That made sense to me. I'd barely been gone for a few days and had been struggling with my separation from the sea. There was no doubt it was worse for him. He never had told me quite how long he'd been away, but we'd have time to figure it out.

"Where has Erickson gone?" I asked, searching around the water for him.

"I think he fell over there." Aaron pointed to where the bubbles were falling.

I looked between the two men. There was no doubt in my mind that Aaron was the better of the two, but I wasn't sure I could let someone die when I had the power to save them, even if that was precisely the kind of

attitude that got me into this mess in the first place. It wasn't Erickson's fault I was naive though. But I did know I'd be the one undoing this mess. The only thing I wasn't so sure about was why people couldn't talk about the curse. Perhaps it was just some kind of mind trick.

"You want to go after him?" Aaron asked.

I nodded. "We need to."

"We do. If we don't send him back with a warning, we won't be able to ever live in peace." He was right. If we didn't stop this at the source, then we were only solving the situation for current merpeople. Future generations would have to fend for themselves. We owed them more than that.

The two of us set off deeper into the sea, towards the source of the bubbles. It would take both of us to bring him to the surface, and to watch each other's backs. There was no way I was going to trust another human. Especially not Erickson. Stealing from me once was on him. Taking from me twice would be on me.

Cold seeped through me, taking me a little by surprise. I hadn't realised I'd gotten so used to the warmth on land, but it was going to take some adjusting to being back beneath the waves.

We finally found him, unconscious and floating away with his hair waving in the current. We needed to act quickly, or he was going to end up well and truly dead and gone. While there was some kind of poetic justice in that, I still didn't want his blood on my hands.

I hooked my arm through his, aware of Aaron doing the same on the other side. Slowly, and in surprising unison, we began to swim towards the surface, dragging the unaware human with us. I could see Shelbie patrolling above us, though I was sure she must want to spend her time playing now, rather than just doing what she could to protect us. I'd make sure to fuss over her later for her role in helping me save the souls. And I'd make sure everyone else knew what she'd done too. Some of the mer looked down on

me for spending so much time with her. They even referred to her as a pet. But that was wrong. She was so much more than that, and they needed to understand that was the case.

"If we go up here, we should be able to push him up onto the rock," Aaron said.

I nodded. "Sounds good."

We broke the surface at the same time, both of us shaking our heads back to get the hair out of our eyes. Between us, we lifted Erickson to make sure his mouth and nose were above the water. It would make no sense for us to have done so much to help him, only to drown on the water still left in his system.

"One, two, three..." Aaron counted, and we lifted him together.

Shelbie pulled herself onto the rock beside us, eyeing Erickson warily, as if unsure what to make of his prone form. I didn't blame her. He'd caused a lot of our problems, and it wasn't going to be easy to forget that.

My breathing became laboured as we moved him onto the rocks. His clothes and his unconsciousness only adding to the deadweight between us.

"Now what do we do?" I asked as we stared at the body just lying there in front of us.

Aaron picked up the other man's wrist and pressed two fingers to it, feeling for the pulse. "He's still alive."

"That's something, at least," I muttered. Though not much. A part of me was just annoyed that he'd survived after all that. The rest of me knew that there wasn't any other way to have it.

Shelbie squeaked at me and nudged him with one of her flippers.

"If you have an idea, be my guest." I gestured towards the body, hoping whatever it was she had in mind would actually work.

Without waiting for us to say anything else, Shelbie bounced up onto her back legs and threw her weight down on Erickson's chest.

I squealed and flung my arms around Aaron, unsure about what I was hiding from. His arm snaked around my waist, pulling me closer and offering the comfort I sought. That was an unexpected advantage of everything going on.

Water spurted from Erickson's mouth, and he coughed, pushing Shelbie away from him so he could choke up more water.

Good. If he was alive, he could deliver a message for us.

"What..." His voice came out croaky, no doubt from the volume of water he'd swallowed accidentally.

"We have a message for you and your ilk," I said, putting as much steel into my voice as I could muster. "Stay away from the mer. Their souls are not yours. Nothing of theirs is yours. If you come after us again, you will be faced with much worse than just a dark city." Even as I said it, I realised how true the words were. One look at the skyline showed how much what we'd done had changed things. Not one light shone from any of the windows, and I was sure the rest of the power was just as gone. They were going to struggle to recuperate from this, no matter how hard they tried.

"And if we ever see you again..." Aaron threatened.

I wondered what he was going to finish the sentence with, but Erickson clearly didn't. He scrambled to his feet and rushed away, a little unsteady on his feet.

"Do you think they'll stay away?" I asked, shivering in Aaron's arms.

"I don't think they'll have a choice," he responded. "Their city is useless. They haven't brought in any other source of power and can't replace it now."

"Let's just hope that's enough to stop them coming back." I shuddered at the thought.

"We'll make sure they don't," he promised. "Now, home?"

"Yes. Please."

Home sounded perfect at that moment.

EPILOGUE

I TRIED NOT to overthink about the darkness stretching in front of me. I knew we'd had no choice but to stop Erickson and his cohorts, but it still made me feel a little guilty to have displaced so many people. A lot of them probably hadn't even realised what it was that had been powering their city.

And now they never would.

All they knew was that one day, the lights had gone out, and nothing any of them did would bring them back. It must have been scary. Terrifying even. I couldn't imagine being that frightened, even after the moment where I thought my soul would be destroyed.

Shelbie pressed her head into my hand, almost as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. I was sure she did. And that she felt the same. At least none of us had come away with any lasting scars.

"I thought I'd find you here," Aaron observed, pulling himself up onto the rock and sitting next to me. "Are you trying to be guilty again?"

"There's no trying," I admitted, nestling into me as he put his arm around me and pulled me close.

"They brought it on themselves, Mari. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I know." And I did. I hadn't hurt anyone, or done anything that could cause harm. The worst thing I did was destroy a warehouse where they

were storing souls. And that was an accident anyway.

"I promise, no one blames you..."

"I know no one here blames me." Quite the opposite. I was seen as some weird kind of hero, and that wasn't something I wanted. None of this had been for fame or position or anything. But now, everyone knew who I was and not just because of my father. And with all the souls of those who'd been trapped like Aaron, that was a lot more people than there'd been before.

"Do you want to get away? Travel?"

I nodded. "That would be nice. So long as no one sends word I'm coming up ahead," I half-joked.

He chuckled. "I'll make sure they don't."

We lapsed into a familiar silence. We'd become used to each other in the past few weeks. Something that I was both very grateful of, and very nervous about.

"You never did tell me what you were when we met," I told him.

"So, I didn't. I'm sorry about that, it wasn't something we talked about a lot."

"Just like the curse," I muttered. I still wasn't clear on what it was that had caused the pain in our mouths when we'd tried to talk about it. All I knew was that the problem no longer seemed to exist. The only explanation we'd come up with was that it had been something in the warehouse causing the pain. I'd have to resign myself to never knowing.

"We called ourselves the air sylphs."

"Like in the story?"

"I guess so? Someone must have heard one of the humans telling their version and decided that's what we were. It kind of makes sense. It was what happened to the mermaid after she died."

"Hmm."

"You don't believe she was real?" he joked.

"Who knows what's real and what isn't," I responded morosely. I didn't like the fact our story was so different in the version from land. No wonder they saw us as soulless. Or maybe they told the story that way to assuage them of any guilt they felt for stealing our souls and making us their energy source.

"It's probably just a story we both tell our children to make them think twice about running away to be with someone they don't know," he teased.

"Does that count for me as well?"

The laugh escaped before I could stop it. "I don't think anyone would describe us as hardly knowing one another." We spent far too much time together for that. Other than Shelbie, he was my closest friend in the underwater city. Unlike Shelbie, he was fast becoming more than that.

"Is that what you think about us?" he murmured.

I turned my head to face him, intrigued by the sudden shyness in his voice. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He flashed me a weak smile. "I will be."

I frowned, completely confused by whatever it was that had him in knots.

"Aaron?"

He reached out and touched my face. I leaned into him, enjoying the warmth of his fingers against my cheek. Without warning, he leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. After a moment to work out what was going on, I melted into him, kissing him back. I'd thought about this moment countless times but never thought it would actually happen. He was always far too careful around me.

I rested one of my hands on the smooth scales of his tail, threading the other one through his hair to pull him closer. Now he'd opened this door for us, there was no going back. Hopefully, he wouldn't decide I was a rubbish kisser that he wanted nothing to do with me than this one kiss on a rock.

A splash caught our attention, and we both pulled back from the kiss to find out what it was.

"Is she always going to be getting in the way like that?" Aaron asked, batting some water in Shelbie's direction.

She took it as an invitation to play and started chasing his hand. Despite his question, Aaron kept playing with her, even going as far as letting her catch his hand on occasion. She made some odd squeaking noises that I assumed meant she was happy.

Focusing on my aura reader sight, I looked at the seal once more. The happy glow coming from her was undeniable. She was more than happy. She was in her element, and she was making sure everyone knew about it.

Curious and unable to control it, I looked at Aaron. His aura was a similar bright vibe as Shelbie's, but there were hints of something else in it too. Whatever the emotion was, it was new to me, but felt almost familiar at the same time.

"Do you like what you're seeing?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, sorry, I shouldn't be looking." I glanced away, embarrassed to have been caught looking at his aura. It would have been much more polite if I'd asked him first.

"It's okay, there's nothing there that you can't see," he assured me. "But do you like it?"

His conversation didn't make a lot of sense at first, but the more I thought about it, and the more I watched his aura, the more at ease I felt.

"Yes, I like it," I whispered.

"Good," he replied, leaning in to kiss me again. I let him, enjoying the feel of his lips against mine. "Because I want to spend the rest of my second chance with you," he said once he'd pulled back.

"Where do you want to go for that second chance?" I didn't really want to stay here, but for him, I would.

"Everywhere. I want to travel the world and see everything I didn't get a chance to the first time."

"I can help with that," I promised.

"Good. Because I was hoping you'd know where to go..."

I smiled up at him, my heart beating faster with every moment. I couldn't wait to start an adventure with him. I wanted it more than anything else in the world. And now I didn't need to worry about the loss of my soul. I was free.

Thank you for reading *Balanced Scales*. Thank you for reading *Balanced Scales*, I hope you enjoyed this The Little Mermaid retelling. The Untold Tales series continues with Thumbelina in *Golden Wings*:
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal, fantasy, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance. When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set. Laura specialises in quick reads, whether you're looking for a swoonworthy romance for the bath, or an action-packed adventure for your latest journey, you'll find the perfect match amongst her books!

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